STORIES BY MEN

One dozen public domain science fiction, adventure, humor, and horror short stories
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The LAST Gentleman
By Rory Magill

No one knew, no one cared. For a great lethargy was overcoming the people and their only salvation was--

The explosion brought Jim Peters upright in bed. He sat there, leaning back on the heels of his hands, blinking stupidly at the wall. His vision cleared and he looked down at Myra, just stirring beside him. Myra opened her eyes.

Jim said, "Did you feel that?"

Myra yawned. "I thought I was dreaming. It was an explosion or something, wasn't it?"

Jim's lips set grimly. After ten years of cold war, there was only one appropriate observation, and he made it. "I guess maybe this is it."

As by common agreement, they got out of bed and pulled on their robes. They went downstairs and out into the warm summer night. Other people had come out of their homes also. Shadowy figures moved and collected in the darkness.

"Sounded right on top of us."

"I was looking out the window. Didn't see no flash."

"Must have been further away than it seemed."

This last was spoken hopefully, and reflected the mood of all the people. Maybe it wasn't the bomb after all.

Oddly, no one had thought to consult a radio. The thought struck them as a group and they broke into single and double units again--hurrying back into the houses. Lights began coming on here and there.

Jim Peters took Myra's hand, unconsciously, as they hurried up the porch steps. "Hugh would know," Jim said. "I kind of wish Hugh was here."

Myra laughed lightly--a calculated laugh, meant to disguise the gravity of this terrible thing. "That's not very patriotic, Jim. If that was the bomb, Hugh will be kept busy making other bombs to send back to them."

"But he'd know. I'll bet he could tell just by the sound of it." Jim smiled quietly in the darkness--proudly. It wasn't everybody who had a genius for a brother. A nuclear scientist didn't happen in every family. Hugh was somebody to be proud of.

They turned on the radio and sat huddled in front of it. The tubes warmed with maddening slowness. Then there came the deliberately impersonal voice of the announcer:

"--on the strength of reports now in, it appears the enemy bungled badly. Instead of crippling the nation, they succeeded only in alerting it. The bombs--at this time there appear to have been five of them dropped--formed a straight north-south line across western United States. One detonated close to the Idaho-Utah line. The other four were placed at almost equi-distant points to the south--the fifth bomb,

according to first reports, exploding in a Mexican desert. We have been informed that Calas, Utah, a town of nine hundred persons, has been completely annihilated. For further reports, keep tuned to this station."

[Illustration: _The fifth "one" exploded in the Mexican desert._]

A dance band cut in. Jim got up from his chair. "They certainly did bungle," he said. "Imagine wasting four atom bombs like that."

Myra got up also. "Would you like some coffee?"

"That'd be a good idea. I don't feel like going back to bed. I want to listen for more reports."

But there were no more reports. An hour passed. Another and another. Jim spun the dials and got either silence or the cheerful blatherings of some inane disc jockey who prattled on as though nothing had happened.

Finally Jim snapped the set off. "Censorship," he said. "Now we're going to see what it's really like."

In the morning they gathered again in groups--the villagers in this little community of five hundred, and discussed the shape of things to come, as they visualized them.

"It'll take a little time to get into action," old Sam Bennett said. "Even expecting it, and with how fast things move these days--it'll take time."

"If they invade us--come down from the north--you think the government will let us know they're coming?"

"You can't tell. Censorship is a funny thing. In the last war, we knew

more about what was going on in Europe than the people that lived there."

At that moment, old Mrs. Kendal fainted dead away and had to be carried home. Three men carried her and Tom Edwards was one of them. "Kind of heavy, ain't she?" Tom said. "I never thought Mary weighed much more than a hundred."

That night the village shook. In his home, Jim staggered against the wall. Myra fell to the floor. There were two tremors--the second worse than the first. Then things steadied away, and he helped Myra to her feet.

"But there wasn't any noise," Myra whispered. The whisper was loud in the silence.

"That was an earthquake," Jim said. "Nothing to worry about. Might be one of the bomb's after effects."

The quake did no great damage in the village, but it possibly contributed to old Mrs. Kendal's death. She passed on an hour later. "Poor old lady," a neighbor told Myra. "She was plain weary. That was what she said just before she closed her eyes. 'Hazel' she said, 'I'm just plumb tuckered.'"

The neighbor wiped her face with her apron and turned toward home. "Think I'll lie down for a spell. I'm tuckered myself. Can't take things like I used to."

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Now it was a week after the earthquake--two weeks after the falling of the bombs, and the town went on living. But it was strange, very strange. Art Cordell voiced the general opinion when he said, "You know,

we waited a long time for the thing to happen--we kind of visualized, maybe, how it'd be. But I didn't figure it'd be anything like this."

"Maybe there isn't any war," Jim said. "Washington hasn't said so."

"Censorship."

"But isn't that carrying censorship a little too far? The people ought to be told whether or not they're at war."

But the people didn't seem to care. A deadening lethargy had settled over them. A lethargy they felt and questioned in their own minds, but didn't talk about, much. Talking itself seemed to have become an effort.

This continued weariness--this dragging of one foot after another--was evidently the result of radiation from the bombs. What other place could it come from? The radiation got blamed for just about everything untoward that happened. It caused Jenkin's apples to fall before they were half-ripe. Something about it bent the young wheat to the ground where it mildewed and rotted.

Some even blamed the radiation for the premature birth of Jane Elman's baby, even though such things had happened before even gun powder was
invented.

But it certainly was a strange war. Nothing came over the radio at all. Nobody seemed to care, really. Probably because they were just plain too tired. Jim Peters dragged himself to and from work in sort of a daze. Myra got her housework done, but it was a greater effort every day. All she could think of was the times she could drop on the lounge for a rest. She didn't care much whether a war was going on or not.

People had quit waiting for them to come down from the north. They knew

that the places where the bombs had fallen were guarded like Fort Knox. Nobody got in or out.

Jim remembered the flash, the color, the rumors, the excitement of World War Two. The grim resolution of the people to buckle down and win it. Depots jammed. Kids going off to join.

But nobody went to join this war. That was funny. Somehow Jim hadn't thought of that before. None of the kids was being called up. Did they have enough men? Washington didn't say. Washington didn't say anything.

And the people didn't seem to care. That was the strange thing, when you could get your tired mind to focus on it.

The people didn't care. They were too busily occupied with the grim business of putting one foot in front of the other.

Jim got home one evening to find Myra staring dully at a small handful of ground meat. "That's a pound," she said.

Jim frowned. "What do you mean? That little bit?"

Myra nodded. "I asked for a pound of hamburger and Art put that much on the scale. In fact not even that much. It said a pound. I saw it. But there was such a little bit that he felt guilty and put some more on."

Jim turned away. "I'm not hungry anyhow," he said.

* * * * *

At ten that night, after they were in bed, a knock sounded on the door. They had been in bed three hours, because all they could think of as soon as they had eaten was getting into bed and staying there until the last possible minute on the following morning.

But the knock came and Jim went down. He called back upstairs with more life than he'd shown in a long time, "Myra--come down. It's Hugh. Hugh's come to see us."

And Myra came down quickly--something she hadn't done for a long time either.

Hugh seemed weary and drawn, but his smile was the same. Hugh hadn't changed a great deal from the gangling kid who never studied mathematics
in school but always had the answers. It came natural to him.

During the coffee that Myra made, Hugh said, "Had quite a time getting here. Trains disrupted. All air lines grounded. But I wanted to see you again before--"

"Then there _is_ a war," Jim said. "We've been kind of wondering out here. With the censorship we don't get any news and the people hereabouts have almost forgotten the bombs I guess."

Hugh stared into his coffee cup for a long time. "No--there isn't any war." Hugh grinned wryly. "I don't think anybody in the world has got enough energy left to fight one."

"There _was_ one then? One that's over?" Jim felt suddenly like a fool, sitting here on a world that might have gone through a war stretching from pole to pole, and asking if it had happened as though he lived on Mars somewhere--out of touch. But that's the way it was.

"No there wasn't any war."

"You mean our government shot off those bombs themselves? You know I thought it was funny. Landing out in the desert that way like they did.

"Old Joe would have hit for Chicago or Detroit or New York. It was silly to say bombs dropped on the desert came from an enemy."

"No--the government didn't fire them."

Myra set her cup down. "Jim, stop asking Hugh so many questions. He's tired. He's come a long way. The questions can wait."

"Yes--I guess they can. We'll show you where your room is, Hugh."

As she opened the window of the spare bedroom, Myra stood for a moment
looking out. "Moon's certainly pretty tonight. So big and yellow. Wish I wasn't too tired to enjoy it."

They went to bed then, in the quiet home under the big yellow moon over the quiet town. A moon over a quiet country--over a weary, waiting, world.

Jim didn't go to work the next day. He hadn't planned to stay away from work, but he and Myra awoke very late and it was then that he made up his mind. For a long time, they lay in bed, not even the thought of Hugh being around and all the things they wanted to talk about, could bring them out of bed until they felt guilty about not getting up.

Hugh was sitting on the front porch watching the still trees in the yard. There was a breeze blowing, but it wasn't enough to move the leaves. Every leaf hung straight down, not stirring, and the grass seemed matted and bent toward the earth.

Myra got breakfast. She dropped the skillet while transferring the eggs to a platter but she got her foot out of the way so no harm was done. After breakfast the men went back outside. Jim moved automatically

toward a chair.

Then he stopped and frowned. He straightened deliberately. He turned and looked at his brother. He said, "Hugh. You're a man that knows. What's wrong? What did those bombs do to us? Tell me. I've got to know."

Hugh was silent for a time. Then he said, "Feel up to a walk?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

They went to the edge of town and out into a pasture and stopped finally by a brook where the water flowed sluggishly.

After a while, Hugh said, "I'm not supposed to tell anybody anything, but somehow it doesn't seem decent--keeping the truth from your own brother. And what difference does it make--really?"

"What's happened, Hugh."

"There weren't any bombs."

"No bombs."

"It happened this way. Long before this Earth was formed, a million light years out in space, a white dwarf died violently."

"You're talking in riddles."

Hugh looked up into the blue sky. "A dwarf star, Jim. So incredibly heavy, it would be hard for you to conceive of its weight. This star blew up--broke into five pieces and the five pieces followed each other through space. This world was formed in the meantime--maybe even this galaxy--we don't know. So the five pieces of heavy star had a rendezvous with a world unborn. The world was born and grew old and then the

rendezvous was kept. Right on schedule. On some schedule so huge and ponderous we can't even begin to understand it."

"The five bombs."

"They hit the earth in a line and drove deep into the ground. But that was only the beginning. It all has to do with magnetism--the way they kept right on burrowing toward the center of our earth--causing the earthquakes--causing apples to fall from trees." Hugh turned to glance at Jim. "Did you know you weigh around six hundred pounds now?"

"I haven't weighed myself lately."

"We checked and found out what the stuff was. We'd never seen anything like it before. That star was a real heavyweight. All the pieces are drawing together toward the center of earth. But they'll never get there."

"They won't."

"We're doomed, Jim. Earth is doomed. That's the why of this censorship. We didn't want panics--mass suicide--a world gone mad."

"How's it going to come?"

"If allowed to run its course, the world would come to a complete standstill. Nothing would grow. People would move slower and slower until they finally fell in their tracks and could not get up. Eternal night on one side of a dead planet--eternal day on the other."

"But it's not going to happen?"

Hugh's mind went off on another track. "You know, Jim--I've never been a religious man. In fact I've only had one concept of God. I believe that

God--above all, is a gentleman."

Jim said nothing and after a moment, Hugh went on. "Do you know what they do when they execute a man by firing squad?"

"What do they do?"

"After the squad fires its volley, the Captain steps up to the fallen man and puts a bullet through his brain. The man is executed for a reason, but the bullet is an act of mercy--the act of a gentleman.

"We are being executed for a reason we can't understand, and the bullet has already been fired, Jim. Another ten hours--eleven hours."

"What bullet?"

"Look up there. See it? The Moon."

Jim looked dully into the sky. "It's bigger--a way bigger."

"Hurtling in toward us at ever increasing speed. When it hits--"

Jim looked at his brother with complete understanding at last. "When it hits--we won't be here any more."

"That's right. A quick, easy death for the world--from the bullet fired by the Last Gentleman."

They turned back toward the house. "Shall I tell Myra," Jim asked.

"What do you think you should do?"

"No--no, we won't tell her. We've got ten hours."

"Yes--we've got ten hours."

"Let's go home and have some coffee."

JEEVES IN THE SPRINGTIME
from The Project Gutenberg EBook #8176
of *Death At The Excelsior*, by P. G. Wodehouse

"'Morning, Jeeves," I said.

"Good morning, sir," said Jeeves.

He put the good old cup of tea softly on the table by my bed, and I took a refreshing sip. Just right, as usual. Not too hot, not too sweet, not too weak, not too strong, not too much milk, and not a drop spilled in the saucer. A most amazing cove, Jeeves. So dashed competent in every respect. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. I mean to say, take just one small instance. Every other valet I've ever had used to barge into my room in the morning while I was still asleep, causing much misery; but Jeeves seems to know when I'm awake by a sort of telepathy. He always floats in with the cup exactly two minutes after I come to life. Makes a deuce of a lot of difference to a fellow's day.

"How's the weather, Jeeves?"

"Exceptionally clement, sir."

"Anything in the papers?"

"Some slight friction threatening in the Balkans, sir. Otherwise, nothing."

"I say, Jeeves, a man I met at the club last night told me to put my shirt on Privateer for the two o'clock race this afternoon. How about it?"

"I should not advocate it, sir. The stable is not sanguine."

That was enough for me. Jeeves knows. How, I couldn't say, but he knows. There was a time when I would laugh lightly, and go ahead, and lose my little all against his advice, but not now.

"Talking of shirts," I said, "have those mauve ones I ordered arrived yet?"

"Yes, sir. I sent them back."

"Sent them back?"

"Yes, sir. They would not have become you."

Well, I must say I'd thought fairly highly of those shirtings, but I bowed to superior knowledge. Weak? I don't know. Most fellows, no doubt, are all for having their valets confine their activities to creasing trousers and what not without trying to run the home; but it's different with Jeeves. Right from the first day he came to me, I have looked on him as a sort of guide, philosopher, and friend.

"Mr. Little rang up on the telephone a few moments ago, sir. I informed him that you were not yet awake."

"Did he leave a message?"

"No, sir. He mentioned that he had a matter of importance to discuss with you, but confided no details."

"Oh, well, I expect I shall be seeing him at the club."

"No doubt, sir."

I wasn't what you might call in a fever of impatience. Bingo Little is a chap I was at school with, and we see a lot of each other still. He's

the nephew of old Mortimer Little, who retired from business recently with a goodish pile. (You've probably heard of Little's Liniment--It Limbers Up the Legs.) Bingo biffs about London on a pretty comfortable allowance given him by his uncle, and leads on the whole a fairly unclouded life. It wasn't likely that anything which he described as a matter of importance would turn out to be really so frightfully important. I took it that he had discovered some new brand of cigarette which he wanted me to try, or something like that, and didn't spoil my breakfast by worrying.

After breakfast I lit a cigarette and went to the open window to inspect the day. It certainly was one of the best and brightest.

"Jeeves," I said.

"Sir?" said Jeeves. He had been clearing away the breakfast things, but at the sound of the young master's voice cheesed it courteously.

"You were absolutely right about the weather. It is a juicy morning."

"Decidedly, sir."

"Spring and all that."

"Yes, sir."

"In the spring, Jeeves, a livelier iris gleams upon the burnished dove."

"So I have been informed, sir."

"Right ho! Then bring me my whangee, my yellowest shoes, and the old green Homburg. I'm going into the Park to do pastoral dances."

I don't know if you know that sort of feeling you get on these days round about the end of April and the beginning of May, when the sky's a light blue, with cotton-wool clouds, and there's a bit of a breeze blowing from the west? Kind of uplifted feeling. Romantic, if you know what I mean. I'm not much of a ladies' man, but on this particular morning it seemed to me that what I really wanted was some charming girl to buzz up and ask me to save her from assassins or something. So that it was a bit of an anti-climax when I merely ran into young Bingo Little, looking perfectly foul in a crimson satin tie decorated with horseshoes.

"Hallo, Bertie," said Bingo.

"My God, man!" I gargled. "The cravat! The gent's neckwear! Why? For what reason?"

"Oh, the tie?" He blushed. "I--er--I was given it."

He seemed embarrassed, so I dropped the subject. We toddled along a bit, and sat down on a couple of chairs by the Serpentine.

"Jeeves tells me you want to talk to me about something," I said.

"Eh?" said Bingo, with a start. "Oh yes, yes. Yes."

I waited for him to unleash the topic of the day, but he didn't seem to want to get going. Conversation languished. He stared straight ahead of him in a glassy sort of manner.

"I say, Bertie," he said, after a pause of about an hour and a quarter.

"Hallo!"

"Do you like the name Mabel?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"You don't think there's a kind of music in the word, like the wind rustling gently through the tree-tops?"

"No."

He seemed disappointed for a moment; then cheered up.

"Of course, you wouldn't. You always were a fatheaded worm without any soul, weren't you?"

"Just as you say. Who is she? Tell me all."

For I realised now that poor old Bingo was going through it once again. Ever since I have known him--and we were at school together--he has been perpetually falling in love with someone, generally in the spring, which seems to act on him like magic. At school he had the finest collection of actresses' photographs of anyone of his time; and at Oxford his romantic nature was a byword.

"You'd better come along and meet her at lunch," he said, looking at his watch.

"A ripe suggestion," I said. "Where are you meeting her? At the Ritz?"

"Near the Ritz."

He was geographically accurate. About fifty yards east of the Ritz

there is one of those blighted tea-and-bun shops you see dotted about all over London, and into this, if you'll believe me, young Bingo dived like a homing rabbit; and before I had time to say a word we were wedged in at a table, on the brink of a silent pool of coffee left there by an early luncher.

I'm bound to say I couldn't quite follow the development of the scenario. Bingo, while not absolutely rolling in the stuff, has always had a fair amount of the ready. Apart from what he got from his uncle, I knew that he had finished up the jumping season well on the right side of the ledger. Why, then, was he lunching the girl at this God-forsaken eatery? It couldn't be because he was hard up.

Just then the waitress arrived. Rather a pretty girl.

"Aren't we going to wait----?" I started to say to Bingo, thinking it somewhat thick that, in addition to asking a girl to lunch with him in a place like this, he should fling himself on the foodstuffs before she turned up, when I caught sight of his face, and stopped.

The man was goggling. His entire map was suffused with a rich blush. He looked like the Soul's Awakening done in pink.

"Hallo, Mabel!" he said, with a sort of gulp.

"Hallo!" said the girl.

"Mabel," said Bingo, "this is Bertie Wooster, a pal of mine."

"Pleased to meet you," she said. "Nice morning."

"Fine," I said.

"You see I'm wearing the tie," said Bingo.

"It suits you beautiful," said the girl.

Personally, if anyone had told me that a tie like that suited me, I should have risen and struck them on the mazzard, regardless of their age and sex; but poor old Bingo simply got all flustered with gratification, and smirked in the most gruesome manner.

"Well, what's it going to be to-day?" asked the girl, introducing the business touch into the conversation.

Bingo studied the menu devoutly.

"I'll have a cup of cocoa, cold veal and ham pie, slice of fruit cake, and a macaroon. Same for you, Bertie?"

I gazed at the man, revolted. That he could have been a pal of mine all these years and think me capable of insulting the old turn with this sort of stuff cut me to the quick.

"Or how about a bit of hot steak-pudding, with a sparkling limado to wash it down?" said Bingo.

You know, the way love can change a fellow is really frightful to contemplate. This chappie before me, who spoke in that absolutely careless way of macaroons and limado, was the man I had seen in happier days telling the head-waiter at Claridge's exactly how he wanted the _chef_ to prepare the _sole frite au gourmet aux champignons_, and saying he would jolly well sling it back if it wasn't just right. Ghastly! Ghastly!

A roll and butter and a small coffee seemed the only things on the list that hadn't been specially prepared by the nastier-minded members of the Borgia family for people they had a particular grudge against, so I

chose them, and Mabel hopped it.

"Well?" said Bingo rapturously.

I took it that he wanted my opinion of the female poisoner who had just left us.

"Very nice," I said.

He seemed dissatisfied.

"You don't think she's the most wonderful girl you ever saw?" he said wistfully.

"Oh, absolutely!" I said, to appease the blighter. "Where did you meet her?"

"At a subscription dance at Camberwell."

"What on earth were you doing at a subscription dance at Camberwell?"

"Your man Jeeves asked me if I would buy a couple of tickets. It was in aid of some charity or other."

"Jeeves? I didn't know he went in for that sort of thing."

"Well, I suppose he has to relax a bit every now and then. Anyway, he was there, swinging a dashed efficient shoe. I hadn't meant to go at first, but I turned up for a lark. Oh, Bertie, think what I might have missed!"

"What might you have missed?" I asked, the old lemon being slightly clouded.

"Mabel, you chump. If I hadn't gone I shouldn't have met Mabel."

"Oh, ah!"

At this point Bingo fell into a species of trance, and only came out of it to wrap himself round the pie and macaroon.

"Bertie," he said, "I want your advice."

"Carry on."

"At least, not your advice, because that wouldn't be much good to anybody. I mean, you're a pretty consummate old ass, aren't you? Not that I want to hurt your feelings, of course."

"No, no, I see that."

"What I wish you would do is to put the whole thing to that fellow Jeeves of yours, and see what he suggests. You've often told me that he has helped other pals of yours out of messes. From what you tell me, he's by way of being the brains of the family."

"He's never let me down yet."

"Then put my case to him."

"What case?"

"My problem."

"What problem?"

"Why, you poor fish, my uncle, of course. What do you think my uncle's going to say to all this? If I sprang it on him cold, he'd tie himself

in knots on the hearthrug."

"One of these emotional Johnnies, eh?"

"Somehow or other his mind has got to be prepared to receive the news. But how?"

"Ah!"

"That's a lot of help, that 'ah'! You see, I'm pretty well dependent on the old boy. If he cut off my allowance, I should be very much in the soup. So you put the whole binge to Jeeves and see if he can't scare up a happy ending somehow. Tell him my future is in his hands, and that, if the wedding bells ring out, he can rely on me, even unto half my kingdom. Well, call it ten quid. Jeeves would exert himself with ten quid on the horizon, what?"

"Undoubtedly," I said.

I wasn't in the least surprised at Bingo wanting to lug Jeeves into his private affairs like this. It was the first thing I would have thought of doing myself if I had been in any hole of any description. As I have frequently had occasion to observe, he is a bird of the ripest intellect, full of bright ideas. If anybody could fix things for poor old Bingo, he could.

I stated the case to him that night after dinner.

"Jeeves."

"Sir?"

"Are you busy just now?"

"No, sir."

"I mean, not doing anything in particular?"

"No, sir. It is my practice at this hour to read some improving book; but, if you desire my services, this can easily be postponed, or, indeed, abandoned altogether."

"Well, I want your advice. It's about Mr. Little."

"Young Mr. Little, sir, or the elder Mr. Little, his uncle, who lives in Pounceby Gardens?"

Jeeves seemed to know everything. Most amazing thing. I'd been pally with Bingo practically all my life, and yet I didn't remember ever having heard that his uncle lived anywhere in particular.

"How did you know he lived in Pounceby Gardens?" I said.

"I am on terms of some intimacy with the elder Mr. Little's cook, sir. In fact, there is an understanding."

I'm bound to say that this gave me a bit of a start. Somehow I'd never thought of Jeeves going in for that sort of thing.

"Do you mean you're engaged?"

"It may be said to amount to that, sir."

"Well, well!"

"She is a remarkably excellent cook, sir," said Jeeves, as though he felt called on to give some explanation. "What was it you wished to ask me about Mr. Little?"

I sprang the details on him.

"And that's how the matter stands, Jeeves," I said. "I think we ought to rally round a trifle and help poor old Bingo put the thing through. Tell me about old Mr. Little. What sort of a chap is he?"

"A somewhat curious character, sir. Since retiring from business he has become a great recluse, and now devotes himself almost entirely to the pleasures of the table."

"Greedy hog, you mean?"

"I would not, perhaps, take the liberty of describing him in precisely those terms, sir. He is what is usually called a gourmet. Very particular about what he eats, and for that reason sets a high value on Miss Watson's services."

"The cook?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it looks to me as though our best plan would be to shoot young Bingo in on him after dinner one night. Melting mood, I mean to say, and all that."

"The difficulty is, sir, that at the moment Mr. Little is on a diet, owing to an attack of gout."

"Things begin to look wobbly."

"No, sir, I fancy that the elder Mr. Little's misfortune may be turned to the younger Mr. Little's advantage. I was speaking only the other day to Mr. Little's valet, and he was telling me that it has become his

principal duty to read to Mr. Little in the evenings. If I were in your place, sir, I should send young Mr. Little to read to his uncle."

"Nephew's devotion, you mean? Old man touched by kindly action, what?"

"Partly that, sir. But I would rely more on young Mr. Little's choice of literature."

"That's no good. Jolly old Bingo has a kind face, but when it comes to literature he stops at the _Sporting Times_."

"That difficulty may be overcome. I would be happy to select books for Mr. Little to read. Perhaps I might explain my idea further?"

"I can't say I quite grasp it yet."

"The method which I advocate is what, I believe, the advertisers call Direct Suggestion, sir, consisting as it does of driving an idea home by constant repetition. You may have had experience of the system?"

"You mean they keep on telling you that some soap or other is the best, and after a bit you come under the influence and charge round the corner and buy a cake?"

"Exactly, sir. The same method was the basis of all the most valuable propaganda during the recent war. I see no reason why it should not be adopted to bring about the desired result with regard to the subject's views on class distinctions. If young Mr. Little were to read day after day to his uncle a series of narratives in which marriage with young persons of an inferior social status was held up as both feasible and admirable, I fancy it would prepare the elder Mr. Little's mind for the reception of the information that his nephew wishes to marry a waitress in a tea-shop."

"_Are_ there any books of that sort nowadays? The only ones I ever see mentioned in the papers are about married couples who find life grey, and can't stick each other at any price."

"Yes, sir, there are a great many, neglected by the reviewers but widely read. You have never encountered 'All for Love," by Rosie M. Banks?"

"No."

"Nor 'A Red, Red Summer Rose,' by the same author?"

"No."

"I have an aunt, sir, who owns an almost complete set of Rosie M. Banks'. I could easily borrow as many volumes as young Mr. Little might require. They make very light, attractive reading."

"Well, it's worth trying."

"I should certainly recommend the scheme, sir."

"All right, then. Toddle round to your aunt's to-morrow and grab a couple of the fruitiest. We can but have a dash at it."

"Precisely, sir."

* * * * *

Bingo reported three days later that Rosie M. Banks was the goods and beyond a question the stuff to give the troops. Old Little had jibbed somewhat at first at the proposed change of literary diet, he not being much of a lad for fiction and having stuck hitherto exclusively to the heavier monthly reviews; but Bingo had got chapter one of "All for

Love" past his guard before he knew what was happening, and after that there was nothing to it. Since then they had finished "A Red, Red Summer Rose," "Madcap Myrtle" and "Only a Factory Girl," and were halfway through "The Courtship of Lord Strathmorlick."

Bingo told me all this in a husky voice over an egg beaten up in sherry. The only blot on the thing from his point of view was that it wasn't doing a bit of good to the old vocal cords, which were beginning to show signs of cracking under the strain. He had been looking his symptoms up in a medical dictionary, and he thought he had got "clergyman's throat." But against this you had to set the fact that he was making an undoubted hit in the right quarter, and also that after the evening's reading he always stayed on to dinner; and, from what he told me, the dinners turned out by old Little's cook had to be tasted to be believed. There were tears in the old blighter's eyes as he got on the subject of the clear soup. I suppose to a fellow who for weeks had been tackling macaroons and limado it must have been like Heaven.

Old Little wasn't able to give any practical assistance at these banquets, but Bingo said that he came to the table and had his whack of arrowroot, and sniffed the dishes, and told stories of _entrées_ he had had in the past, and sketched out scenarios of what he was going to do to the bill of fare in the future, when the doctor put him in shape; so I suppose he enjoyed himself, too, in a way. Anyhow, things seemed to be buzzing along quite satisfactorily, and Bingo said he had got an idea which, he thought, was going to clinch the thing. He wouldn't tell me what it was, but he said it was a pippin.

"We make progress, Jeeves," I said.

"That is very satisfactory, sir."

"Mr. Little tells me that when he came to the big scene in 'Only a Factory Girl,' his uncle gulped like a stricken bull-pup."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Where Lord Claude takes the girl in his arms, you know, and says----"

"I am familiar with the passage, sir. It is distinctly moving. It was a great favourite of my aunt's."

"I think we're on the right track."

"It would seem so, sir."

"In fact, this looks like being another of your successes. I've always said, and I always shall say, that for sheer brain, Jeeves, you stand alone. All the other great thinkers of the age are simply in the crowd, watching you go by."

"Thank you very much, sir. I endeavour to give satisfaction."

About a week after this, Bingo blew in with the news that his uncle's gout had ceased to trouble him, and that on the morrow he would be back at the old stand working away with knife and fork as before.

"And, by the way," said Bingo, "he wants you to lunch with him tomorrow."

"Me? Why me? He doesn't know I exist."

"Oh, yes, he does. I've told him about you."

"What have you told him?"

"Oh, various things. Anyhow, he wants to meet you. And take my tip, laddie--you go! I should think lunch to-morrow would be something

special."

I don't know why it was, but even then it struck me that there was something dashed odd--almost sinister, if you know what I mean--about young Bingo's manner. The old egg had the air of one who has something up his sleeve.

"There is more in this than meets the eye," I said. "Why should your uncle ask a fellow to lunch whom he's never seen?"

"My dear old fathead, haven't I just said that I've been telling him all about you--that you're my best pal--at school together, and all that sort of thing?"

"But even then--and another thing. Why are you so dashed keen on my going?"

Bingo hesitated for a moment.

"Well, I told you I'd got an idea. This is it. I want you to spring the news on him. I haven't the nerve myself."

"What! I'm hanged if I do!"

"And you call yourself a pal of mine!"

"Yes, I know; but there are limits."

"Bertie," said Bingo reproachfully, "I saved your life once."

"When?"

"Didn't I? It must have been some other fellow, then. Well, anyway, we were boys together and all that. You can't let me down."

"Oh, all right," I said. "But, when you say you haven't nerve enough for any dashed thing in the world, you misjudge yourself. A fellow who----"

"Cheerio!" said young Bingo. "One-thirty to-morrow. Don't be late."

* * * * *

I'm bound to say that the more I contemplated the binge, the less I liked it. It was all very well for Bingo to say that I was slated for a magnificent lunch; but what good is the best possible lunch to a fellow if he is slung out into the street on his ear during the soup course? However, the word of a Wooster is his bond and all that sort of rot, so at one-thirty next day I tottered up the steps of No. 16, Pounceby Gardens, and punched the bell. And half a minute later I was up in the drawing-room, shaking hands with the fattest man I have ever seen in my life.

The motto of the Little family was evidently "variety." Young Bingo is long and thin and hasn't had a superfluous ounce on him since we first met; but the uncle restored the average and a bit over. The hand which grasped mine wrapped it round and enfolded it till I began to wonder if I'd ever get it out without excavating machinery.

"Mr. Wooster, I am gratified--I am proud--I am honoured."

It seemed to me that young Bingo must have boosted me to some purpose.

"Oh, ah!" I said.

He stepped back a bit, still hanging on to the good right hand.

"You are very young to have accomplished so much!"

I couldn't follow the train of thought. The family, especially my Aunt Agatha, who has savaged me incessantly from childhood up, have always rather made a point of the fact that mine is a wasted life, and that, since I won the prize at my first school for the best collection of wild flowers made during the summer holidays, I haven't done a dam' thing to land me on the nation's scroll of fame. I was wondering if he couldn't have got me mixed up with someone else, when the telephone-bell rang outside in the hall, and the maid came in to say that I was wanted. I buzzed down, and found it was young Bingo.

"Hallo!" said young Bingo. "So you've got there? Good man! I knew I could rely on you. I say, old crumpet, did my uncle seem pleased to see you?"

"Absolutely all over me. I can't make it out."

"Oh, that's all right. I just rang up to explain. The fact is, old man, I know you won't mind, but I told him that you were the author of those books I've been reading to him."

"What!"

"Yes, I said that 'Rosie M. Banks' was your pen-name, and you didn't want it generally known, because you were a modest, retiring sort of chap. He'll listen to you now. Absolutely hang on your words. A brightish idea, what? I doubt if Jeeves in person could have thought up a better one than that. Well, pitch it strong, old lad, and keep steadily before you the fact that I must have my allowance raised. I can't possibly marry on what I've got now. If this film is to end with the slow fade-out on the embrace, at least double is indicated. Well, that's that. Cheerio!"

And he rang off. At that moment the gong sounded, and the genial host came tumbling downstairs like the delivery of a ton of coals.

* * * * *

I always look back to that lunch with a sort of aching regret. It was the lunch of a lifetime, and I wasn't in a fit state to appreciate it. Subconsciously, if you know what I mean, I could see it was pretty special, but I had got the wind up to such a frightful extent over the ghastly situation in which young Bingo had landed me that its deeper meaning never really penetrated. Most of the time I might have been eating sawdust for all the good it did me.

Old Little struck the literary note right from the start.

"My nephew has probably told you that I have been making a close study of your books of late?" he began.

"Yes. He did mention it. How--er--how did you like the bally things?"

He gazed reverently at me.

"Mr. Wooster, I am not ashamed to say that the tears came into my eyes as I listened to them. It amazes me that a man as young as you can have been able to plumb human nature so surely to its depths; to play with so unerring a hand on the quivering heart-strings of your reader; to write novels so true, so human, so moving, so vital!"

"Oh, it's just a knack," I said.

The good old persp. was bedewing my forehead by this time in a pretty lavish manner. I don't know when I've been so rattled.

"Do you find the room a trifle warm?"

"Oh, no, no, rather not. Just right."

"Then it's the pepper. If my cook has a fault--which I am not prepared to admit--it is that she is inclined to stress the pepper a trifle in her made dishes. By the way, do you like her cooking?"

I was so relieved that we had got off the subject of my literary output that I shouted approval in a ringing baritone.

"I am delighted to hear it, Mr. Wooster. I may be prejudiced, but to my mind that woman is a genius."

"Absolutely!" I said.

"She has been with me seven years, and in all that time I have not known her guilty of a single lapse from the highest standard. Except once, in the winter of 1917, when a purist might have condemned a certain mayonnaise of hers as lacking in creaminess. But one must make allowances. There had been several air-raids about that time, and no doubt the poor woman was shaken. But nothing is perfect in this world, Mr. Wooster, and I have had my cross to bear. For seven years I have lived in constant apprehension lest some evilly-disposed person might lure her from my employment. To my certain knowledge she has received offers, lucrative offers, to accept service elsewhere. You may judge of my dismay, Mr. Wooster, when only this morning the bolt fell. She gave notice!"

"Good Lord!"

"Your consternation does credit, if I may say so, to the heart of the author of 'A Red, Red Summer Rose.' But I am thankful to say the worst has not happened. The matter has been adjusted. Jane is not leaving me."

"Good egg!"

"Good egg, indeed--though the expression is not familiar to me. I do not remember having come across it in your books. And, speaking of your books, may I say that what has impressed me about them even more than the moving poignancy of the actual narrative, is your philosophy of life. If there were more men like you, Mr. Wooster, London would be a better place."

This was dead opposite to my Aunt Agatha's philosophy of life, she having always rather given me to understand that it is the presence in it of chappies like me that makes London more or less of a plague spot; but I let it go.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Wooster, that I appreciate your splendid defiance of the outworn fetishes of a purblind social system. I appreciate it! You are big enough to see that rank is but the guinea stamp and that, in the magnificent words of Lord Bletchmore in 'Only a Factory Girl,' 'Be her origin ne'er so humble, a good woman is the equal of the finest lady on earth!'"

I sat up.

"I say! Do you think that?"

"I do, Mr. Wooster. I am ashamed to say that there was a time when I was like other men, a slave to the idiotic convention which we call Class Distinction. But, since I read your books----"

I might have known it. Jeeves had done it again.

"You think it's all right for a chappie in what you might call a certain social position to marry a girl of what you might describe as

the lower classes?"

"Most assuredly I do, Mr. Wooster."

I took a deep breath, and slipped him the good news.

"Young Bingo--your nephew, you know--wants to marry a waitress," I said.

"I honour him for it," said old Little.

"You don't object?"

"On the contrary."

I took another deep breath and shifted to the sordid side of the business.

"I hope you won't think I'm butting in, don't you know," I said, "but--er--well, how about it?"

"I fear I do not quite follow you."

"Well, I mean to say, his allowance and all that. The money you're good enough to give him. He was rather hoping that you might see your way to jerking up the total a bit."

Old Little shook his head regretfully.

"I fear that can hardly be managed. You see, a man in my position is compelled to save every penny. I will gladly continue my nephew's existing allowance, but beyond that I cannot go. It would not be fair to my wife."

"What! But you're not married?"

"Not yet. But I propose to enter upon that holy state almost immediately. The lady who for years has cooked so well for me honoured me by accepting my hand this very morning." A cold gleam of triumph came into his eye. "Now let 'em try to get her away from me!" he muttered, defiantly.

* * * * *

"Young Mr. Little has been trying frequently during the afternoon to reach you on the telephone, sir," said Jeeves that night, when I got home.

"I'll bet he has," I said. I had sent poor old Bingo an outline of the situation by messenger-boy shortly after lunch.

"He seemed a trifle agitated."

"I don't wonder. Jeeves," I said, "so brace up and bite the bullet. I'm afraid I've bad news for you.

"That scheme of yours--reading those books to old Mr. Little and all that--has blown out a fuse."

"They did not soften him?"

"They did. That's the whole bally trouble. Jeeves, I'm sorry to say that _fiancée_ of yours--Miss Watson, you know--the cook, you know--well, the long and the short of it is that she's chosen riches instead of honest worth, if you know what I mean."

"Sir?"

"She's handed you the mitten and gone and got engaged to old Mr. Little!"

"Indeed, sir?"

"You don't seem much upset."

"That fact is, sir, I had anticipated some such outcome."

I stared at him. "Then what on earth did you suggest the scheme for?"

"To tell you the truth, sir, I was not wholly averse from a severance of my relations with Miss Watson. In fact, I greatly desired it. I respect Miss Watson exceedingly, but I have seen for a long time that we were not suited. Now, the _other_ young person with whom I have an understanding----"

"Great Scott, Jeeves! There isn't another?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long has this been going on?"

"For some weeks, sir. I was greatly attracted by her when I first met her at a subscription dance at Camberwell."

"My sainted aunt! Not----"

Jeeves inclined his head gravely.

"Yes, sir. By an odd coincidence it is the same young person that young Mr. Little--I have placed the cigarettes on the small table. Good night, sir."

A Kinsman of Red Cloud
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The Jimmyjohn Boss and Other Stories, by Owen Wister

I

It was thirty minutes before a June sundown at the post, and the first call had sounded for parade. Over in the barracks the two companies and the single troop lounged a moment longer, then laid their police literature down, and lifted their stocking feet from the beds to get ready. In the officers' quarters the captain rose regretfully from after-dinner digestion, and the three lieutenants sought their helmets with a sigh. Lieutenant Balwin had been dining an unconventional and impressive guest at the mess, and he now interrupted the anecdote which the guest was achieving with frontier deliberation.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said. "I'll have to hear the rest about the half-breed when I get back."

"There ain't no more--yet. He got my cash with his private poker deck that onced, and I'm fixing for to get his'n."

Second call sounded; the lines filed out and formed, the sergeant of the guard and two privates took their station by the flag, and when battalion was formed the commanding officer, towering steeple-stiff beneath his plumes, received the adjutant's salute, ordered him to his post, and began drill. At all this the unconventional guest looked on comfortably from Lieutenant Balwin's porch.

"I doubt if I could put up with that there discipline all the week," he mused. "Carry--arms! Present--Arms! I guess that's all I know of it." The winking white line of gloves stirred his approval. "Pretty good that. Gosh, see the sun on them bayonets!"

The last note of retreat merged in the sonorous gun, and the flag shining in the light of evening slid down and rested upon the earth. The blue ranks marched to a single bugle--the post was short of men and officers--and the captain, with the released lieutenants, again sought digestion and cigars. Balwin returned to his guest, and together they watched the day forsake the plain. Presently the guest rose to take his leave. He looked old enough to be the father of the young officer, but he was a civilian, and the military man proceeded to give him excellent advice.

"Now don't get into trouble, Cutler."

The slouch-shouldered scout rolled his quid gently, and smiled at his superior with indulgent regard.

"See here, Cutler, you have a highly unoccupied look about you this evening. I've been studying the customs of this population, and I've noted a fact or two."

"Let 'em loose on me, sir."

"Fact one: When any male inhabitant of Fort Laramie has a few spare moments, he hunts up a game of cards."

"Well, sir, you've called the turn on me."

"Fact two: At Fort Laramie a game of cards frequently ends in discussion."

"Fact three: Mr. Calvin, in them discussions Jarvis Cutler has the last word. You put that in your census report alongside the other two."

"Well, Cutler, if somebody's gun should happen to beat yours in an argument, I should have to hunt another wagon-master."

"I'll not forget that. When was you expecting to pull out north?"

"Whenever the other companies get here. May be three days--may be three
weeks."

"Then I will have plenty time for a game to-night."

With this slight dig of his civilian independence into the lieutenant's military ribs, the scout walked away, his long, lugubrious frockcoat (worn in honor of the mess) occasionally flapping open in the breeze, and giving a view of a belt richly fluted with cartridges, and the ivory handle of a pistol looking out of its holster. He got on his horse, crossed the flat, and struck out for the cabin of his sociable friends, Loomis and Kelley, on the hill. The open door and a light inside showed the company, and Cutler gave a grunt, for sitting on the table was the half-breed, the winner of his unavenged dollars. He rode slower, in order to think, and arriving at the corral below the cabin, tied his horse to the stump of a cottonwood. A few steps towards the door, and he wheeled on a sudden thought, and under cover of the night did a crafty something which to the pony was altogether unaccountable. He unloosed both front and rear cinch of his saddle, so they hung entirely free in wide bands beneath the pony's belly. He tested their slackness with his hand several times, stopping instantly when the more and more surprised pony turned his head to see what new thing in his experience might be going on, and, seeing, gave a delicate bounce with his hind-quarters.

"Never you mind, Duster," muttered the scout. "Did you ever see a skunk-trap? Oughts is for mush-rats, and number ones is mostly used for 'coons and 'possums, and I guess they'd do for a skunk. But you and we'll call this here trap a number two, Duster, for the skunk I'm after is a big one. All you've to do is to act natural."

Cutler took the rope off the stump by which Duster had been tied securely, wound and strapped it to the tilted saddle, and instead of this former tether, made a weak knot in the reins, and tossed them over the stump. He entered the cabin with a countenance sweeter than honey.

"Good-evening, boys," he said. "Why, Toussaint, how do you do?"

The hand of Toussaint had made a slight, a very slight, movement towards his hip, but at sight of Cutler's mellow smile resumed its clasp upon his knee.

"Golly, but you're gay-like this evening," said Kelley.

"Blamed if I knowed he could look so frisky," added Loomis.

"Sporting his onced-a-year coat," Kelley pursued. "That ain't for our benefit, Joole."

"No, we're not that high in society." Both these cheerful waifs had drifted from the Atlantic coast westward.

Cutler looked from them to his costume, and then amiably surveyed the half-breed.

"Well, boys, I'm in big luck, I am. How's yourn nowadays, Toussaint?"

"Pretty good sometime. Sometime heap hell." The voice of the half-breed came as near heartiness as its singularly false quality would allow, and as he smiled he watched Cutler with the inside of his eyes.

The scout watched nobody and nothing with great care, looked about him pleasantly, inquired for the whiskey, threw aside hat and gloves, sat down, leaning the chair back against the wall, and talked with artful candor. "Them sprigs of lieutenants down there," said he, "they're a

surprising lot for learning virtue to a man. You take Balwin. Why, he ain't been out of the Academy only two years, and he's been telling me how card-playing ain't good for you. And what do you suppose he's been and offered Jarvis Cutler for a job? I'm to be wagon-master." He paused, and the half-breed's attention to his next words increased. "Wagon-master, and good pay, too. Clean up to the Black Hills; and the troops'll move soon as ever them reinforcements come. Drinks on it, boys! Set 'em up, Joole Loomis. My contract's sealed with some of Uncle Sam's cash, and I'm going to play it right here. Hello! Somebody coming to join us? He's in a hurry."

There was a sound of lashing straps and hoofs beating the ground, and Cutler looked out of the door. As he had calculated, the saddle had gradually turned with Duster's movements and set the pony bucking.

"Stampeded!" said the scout, and swore the proper amount called for by such circumstances. "Some o' you boys help me stop the durned fool."

Loomis and Kelley ran. Duster had jerked the prepared reins from the cottonwood, and was lurching down a small dry gulch, with the saddle bouncing between his belly and the stones.

Cutler cast a backward eye at the cabin where Toussaint had stayed behind alone. "Head him off below, boys, and I'll head him off above," the scout sang out. He left his companions, and quickly circled round behind the cabin, stumbling once heavily, and hurrying on, anxious lest the noise had reached the lurking half-breed. But the ivory-handled pistol, jostled from its holster, lay unheeded among the stones where he had stumbled. He advanced over the rough ground, came close to the logs,
and craftily peered in at the small window in the back of the cabin. It was evident that he had not been heard. The sinister figure within still sat on the table, but was crouched, listening like an animal to the shouts that were coming from a safe distance down in the gulch. Cutler,

outside of the window, could not see the face of Toussaint, but he saw one long brown hand sliding up and down the man's leg, and its movement put him in mind of the tail of a cat. The hand stopped to pull out a pistol, into which fresh cartridges were slipped. Cutler had already done this same thing after dismounting, and he now felt confident that his weapon needed no further examination. He did not put his hand to his holster. The figure rose from the table, and crossed the room to a set of shelves in front of which hung a little yellow curtain. Behind it were cups, cans, bottles, a pistol, counters, red, white, and blue, and two fresh packs of cards, blue and pink, side by side. Seeing these, Toussaint drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and unwrapped two further packs, both blue; and at this Cutler's intent face grew into plain shape close to the window, but receded again into uncertain dimness. From down in the gulch came shouts that the runaway horse was captured. Toussaint listened, ran to the door, and quickly returning, put the blue pack from the shelf into his pocket, leaving in exchange one of his own. He hesitated about altering the position of the cards on the shelf, but Kelley and Loomis were unobservant young men, and the half-breed placed
the pink cards on top of his blue ones. The little yellow curtain again hung innocently over the shelves, and Toussaint, pouring himself a drink of whiskey, faced round, and for the first time saw the window that had been behind his back. He was at it in an instant, wrenching its rusty pin, that did not give, but stuck motionless in the wood. Cursing, he turned and hurried out of the door and round the cabin. No one was there. Some hundred yards away the noiseless Cutler crawled farther among the thickets that filled the head of the gulch. Toussaint whipped out a match, and had it against his trousers to strike and look if there were footprints, when second thoughts warned him this might be seen, and was not worth risking suspicion over, since so many feet came and went by this cabin. He told himself no one could have been there to see him, and slowly returned inside, with a mind that fell a hair's breadth short of conviction.

The boys, coming up with the horse, met Cutler, who listened to how Duster had stood still as soon as he had kicked free of his saddle, making no objection to being caught. They suggested that he would not have broken loose had he been tied with a rope; and hearing this, Cutler bit off a piece of tobacco, and told them they were quite right: a horse should never be tied by his bridle. For a savory moment the scout cuddled his secret, and turned it over like the tobacco lump under his tongue. Then he explained, and received serenely the amazement of Loomis
and Kelley.

"When you kids have travelled this Western country awhile you'll keep your cards locked," said he. "He's going to let us win first. You'll see, he'll play a poor game with the pink deck. Then, if we don't call for fresh cards, why, he'll call for 'em himself. But, just for the fun of the thing, if any of us loses steady, why, we'll call. Then, when he gets hold of his strippers, watch out. When he makes his big play, and is stretchin' for to rake the counters in, you grab 'em, Joole; for by then I'll have my gun on him, and if he makes any trouble we'll feed him to the coyotes. I expect that must have been it, boys," he continued, in a new tone, as they came within possible ear-shot of the half-breed in the cabin. "A coyote come around him where he was tied. The fool horse has seen enough of 'em to git used to 'em, you'd think, but he don't. There; that'll hold him. I guess he'll have to pull the world along with him if he starts to run again."

The lamp was placed on the window-shelf, and the four took seats, Cutler to the left of Toussaint, with Kelley opposite. The pink cards fell harmless, and for a while the game was a dull one to see. Holding a pair of kings, Cutler won a little from Toussaint, who remarked that luck must go with the money of Uncle Sam. After a few hands, the half-breed began to bet with ostentatious folly, and, losing to one man and another, was joked upon the falling off of his game. In an hour's time his blue chips had been twice reinforced, and twice melted from the neat

often-counted pile in which he arranged them; moreover, he had lost a horse from his string down on Chug Water.

"Lend me ten dollar," he said to Cutler. "You rich man now."

In the next few deals Kelley became poor. "I'm sick of this luck," said he.

"Then change it, why don't you? Let's have a new deck." And Loomis rose.

"Joole, you always are for something new," said Cutler. "Now I'm doing pretty well with these pink cards. But I'm no hog. Fetch on your fresh ones."

The eyes of the half-breed swerved to the yellow curtain. He was by a French trapper from Canada out of a Sioux squaw, one of Red Cloud's sisters, and his heart beat hot with the evil of two races, and none of their good. He was at this moment irrationally angry with the men who had won from him through his own devices, and malice undisguised shone in his lean flat face. At sight of the blue cards falling in the first deal, silence came over the company, and from the distant parade-ground the bugle sounded the melancholy strain of taps. Faint, far, solemn, melodious, the music travelled unhindered across the empty night.

"Them men are being checked off in their bunks now," said Cutler.

"What you bet this game?" demanded Toussaint.

"I've heard 'em play that same music over a soldier's grave," said Kelley.

"You goin' to bet?" Toussaint repeated.

Cutler pushed forward the two necessary white chips. No one's hand was

high, and Loomis made a slight winning. The deal went its round several times, and once, when it was Toussaint's, Cutler suspected that special cards had been thrown to him by the half-breed as an experiment. He therefore played the gull to a nicety, betting gently upon his three kings; but when he stepped out boldly and bet the limit, it was not Toussaint but Kelley who held the higher hand, winning with three aces. Why the coup should be held off longer puzzled the scout, unless it was that Toussaint was carefully testing the edges of his marked cards to see if he controlled them to a certainty. So Cutler played on calmly. Presently two aces came to him in Toussaint's deal, and he wondered how many more would be in his three-card draw. Very pretty! One only, and he lost to Loomis, who had drawn three, and held four kings. The hands were getting higher, they said. The game had "something to it now." But Toussaint grumbled, for his luck was bad all this year, he said. Cutler had now made sure that the aces and kings went where the half-breed wished, and could be slid undetected from the top or the middle or the bottom of the pack; but he had no test yet how far down the scale the marking went. At Toussaint's next deal Cutler judged the time had come, and at the second round of betting he knew it. The three white men played their parts, raising each other without pause, and again there was total silence in the cabin. Every face bent to the table, watching the turn repeat its circle with obstinate increase, until new chips and more new chips had been brought to keep on with, and the heap in the middle had mounted high in the hundreds, while in front of Toussaint lay his knife and a match-box--pledges of two more horses which he had staked. He had drawn three cards, while the others took two, except Cutler, who had a pair of kings again, and drawing three, picked up two more. Kelley dropped out, remarking he had bet more than his hand was worth, which was true, and Loomis followed him. Their persistence had surprised Toussaint a little. He had not given every one suspicious hands: Cutler's four kings were enough. He bet once more, was raised by the scout, called, and threw down his four aces.

"That beats me," said Cutler, quietly, and his hand moved under his

frock-coat, as the half-breed, eyeing the central pile of counters in triumph, closed his fingers over it. They were dashed off by Kelley, who looked expectantly across at Cutler, and seeing the scout's face wither into sudden old age, cried out, "For God's sake, Jarvis, where's your gun?" Kelley sprang for the yellow curtain, and reeled backward at the shot of Toussaint. His arm thrashed along the window-sill as he fell, sweeping over the lamp, and flaring channels of oil ran over his body and spread on the ground. But these could no longer hurt him. The half-breed had leaped outside the cabin, enraged that Cutler should have got out during the moment he had been dealing with Kelley. The scout was groping for his ivory-handled pistol off in the darkness. He found it, and hurried to the little window at a second shot he heard inside. Loomis, beating the rising flame away, had seized the pistol from the shelf, and aimlessly fired into the night at Toussaint. He fired again, running to the door from the scorching heat. Cutler got round the house to save him if he could, and saw the half-breed's weapon flash, and the body pitch out across the threshold. Toussaint, gaining his horse, shot three times and missed Cutler, whom he could not clearly see; and he heard the scout's bullets sing past him as his horse bore him rushing away.

II

Jarvis Cutler lifted the dead Loomis out of the cabin. He made a try for Kelley's body, but the room had become a cave of flame, and he was driven from the door. He wrung his hands, giving himself bitter blame aloud, as he covered Loomis with his saddle-blanket, and jumped bareback
upon Duster to go to the post. He had not been riding a minute when several men met him. They had seen the fire from below, and on their way up the half-breed had passed them at a run.

"Here's our point," said Cutler. "Will he hide with the Sioux, or

will he take to the railroad? Well, that's my business more than being wagon-master. I'll get a warrant. You tell Lieutenant Balwin--and somebody give me a fresh horse."

A short while later, as Cutler, with the warrant in his pocket, rode out of Fort Laramie, the call of the sentinels came across the night: "Number One. Twelve o'clock, and all's well." A moment, and the refrain sounded more distant, given by Number Two. When the fourth took it up, far away along the line, the words were lost, leaving something like the faint echo of a song. The half-breed had crossed the Platte, as if he were making for his kindred tribe, but the scout did not believe in this too plain trail.

"There's Chug Water lying right the other way from where he went, and I guess it's there Mr. Toussaint is aiming for." With this idea Cutler swung from north to southwest along the Laramie. He went slowly over his shortcut, not to leave the widely circling Toussaint too much in his rear. The fugitive would keep himself carefully far on the other side of the Laramie, and very likely not cross it until the forks of Chug Water. Dawn had ceased to be gray, and the doves were cooing incessantly among
the river thickets, when Cutler, reaching the forks, found a bottom where the sage-brush grew seven and eight feet high, and buried himself and his horse in its cover. Here was comfort; here both rivers could be safely watched. It seemed a good leisure-time for a little fire and some breakfast. He eased his horse of the saddle, sliced some bacon, and put a match to his pile of small sticks. As the flame caught, he stood up to enjoy the cool of a breeze that was passing through the stillness, and he suddenly stamped his fire out. The smell of another fire had come across Chug Water on the wind. It was incredible that Toussaint should be there already. There was no seeing from this bottom, and if Cutler walked up out of it the other man would see too. If it were Toussaint, he would not stay long in the vast exposed plain across Chug Water, but would go on after his meal. In twenty minutes it would be the thing

to swim or wade the stream, and crawl up the mud bank to take a look. Meanwhile, Cutler dipped in water some old bread that he had and sucked it down, while the little breeze from opposite hook the cottonwood leaves and brought over the smell of cooking meat. The sun grew warmer, and the doves ceased. Cutler opened his big watch, and clapped it shut as the sound of mud heavily slopping into the other river reached him. He crawled to where he could look at the Laramie from among his sagebrush, and there was Toussaint leading his horse down to the water. The half-breed gave a shrill call, and waved his hat. His call was answered, and as he crossed the Laramie, three Sioux appeared, riding to the bank. They waited till he gained their level, when all four rode up the Chug Water, and went out of sight opposite the watching Cutler. The scout threw off some of his clothes, for the water was still high, and when he had crossed, and drawn himself to a level with the plain, there were the four squatted among the sage-brush beside a fire. They sat talking and eating for some time. One of them rose at last, pointed south, and mounting his horse, dwindled to a dot, blurred, and evaporated in the heated, trembling distance. Cutler at the edge of the bank still watched the other three, who sat on the ground. A faint shot came, and they rose at once, mounted, and vanished southward. There was
no following them now in this exposed country, and Cutler, feeling sure that the signal had meant something about Toussaint's horses, made his fire, watered his own horse, and letting him drag a rope where the feed was green, ate his breakfast in ease. Toussaint would get a fresh mount, and proceed to the railroad. With the comfort of certainty and tobacco, the scout lolled by the river under the cottonwood, and even slept. In the cool of the afternoon he reached the cabin of an acquaintance twenty miles south, and changed his horse. A man had passed by, he was told. Looked as if bound for Cheyenne. "No," Cutler said, "he's known there"; and he went on, watching Toussaint's tracks. Within ten miles they veered away from Cheyenne to the southeast, and Cutler struck out on a trail of his own more freely. By midnight he was on Lodge-Pole Creek, sleeping sound among the last trees that he would pass. He slept

twelve hours, having gone to bed knowing he must not come into town by daylight. About nine o'clock he arrived, and went to the railroad station; there the operator knew him. The lowest haunt in the town had a tent south of the Union Pacific tracks; and Cutler, getting his irons, and a man from the saloon, went there, and stepped in, covering the room with his pistol. The fiddle stopped, the shrieking women scattered, and Toussaint, who had a glass in his hand, let it fly at Cutler's head, for he was drunk. There were two customers besides himself.

"Nobody shall get hurt here," said Cutler, above the bedlam that was now set up. "Only that man's wanted. The quieter I get him, the quieter it'll be for others."

Toussaint had dived for his pistol, but the proprietor of the dance-hall, scenting law, struck the half-breed with the butt of another, and he rolled over, and was harmless for some minutes. Then he got on his legs, and was led out of the entertainment, which resumed more gayly than ever. Feet shuffled, the fiddle whined, and truculent treble laughter sounded through the canvas walls as Toussaint walked between Cutler and the saloon-man to jail. He was duly indicted, and upon the scout's deposition committed to trial for the murder of Loomis and Kelley. Cutler, hoping still to be wagon-master, wrote to Lieutenant Balwin, hearing in reply that the reinforcements would not arrive for two months. The session of the court came in one, and Cutler was the Territory's only witness. He gave his name and age, and hesitated over his occupation.

"Call it poker-dealer," sneered Toussaint's attorney.

"I would, but I'm such a fool one," observed the witness. "Put me down as wagon-master to the military outfit that's going to White River."

"What is your residence?"

"Well, I reside in the section that lies between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean."

"A pleasant neighborhood," said the judge, who knew Cutler perfectly, and precisely how well he could deal poker hands.

"It's not a pleasant neighborhood for some." And Cutler looked at Toussaint.

"You think you done with me?" Toussaint inquired, upon which silence was ordered in the court.

Upon Cutler's testimony the half-breed was found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged in six weeks from that day. Hearing this, he looked at the witness. "I see you one day agin," he said.

The scout returned to Fort Laramie, and soon the expected troops arrived, and the expedition started for White River to join Captain Brent. The captain was stationed there to impress Red Cloud, and had written to headquarters that this chief did not seem impressed very deeply, and that the lives of the settlers were insecure. Reinforcements were accordingly sent to him. On the evening before these soldiers left Laramie, news came from the south. Toussaint had escaped from jail. The country was full of roving, dubious Indians, and with the authentic news went a rumor that the jailer had received various messages. These were to the effect that the Sioux nation did not desire Toussaint to be killed by the white man, that Toussaint's mother was the sister of Red Cloud, and that many friends of Toussaint often passed the jailer's house. Perhaps he did get such messages. They are not a nice sort to receive. However all this may have been, the prisoner was gone.

III

Fort Robinson, on the White River, is backed by yellow bluffs that break out of the foot-hills in turret and toadstool shapes, with stunt pines starving between their torrid bastions. In front of the fort the land slants away into the flat unfeatured desert, and in summer the sky is a blue-steel covet that each day shuts the sun and the earth and mankind into one box together, while it lifts at night to let in the cool of the stars. The White River, which is not wide, runs in a curve, and around this curve below the fort some distance was the agency, and beyond it a stockade, inside which in those days dwelt the settlers. All this was strung out on one side of the White River, outside of the curve; and at a point near the agency a foot-bridge of two cottonwood trunks crossed to the concave of the river's bend--a bottom of some extent, filled with growing cottonwoods, and the tepees of many Sioux families. Along the river and on the plain other tepees stood.

One morning, after Lieutenant Balwin had become established at Fort Robinson, he was talking with his friend Lieutenant Powell, when Cutler knocked at the wire door. The wagon-master was a privileged character, and he sat down and commented irrelevantly upon the lieutenant's pictures, Indian curiosities, and other well-meant attempts to conceal the walk:

"What's the trouble, Cutler?"

"Don't know as there's any trouble."

"Come to your point, man; you're not a scout now."

"Toussaint's here."

"What! in camp?"

"Hiding with the Sioux. Two Knives heard about it." (Two Knives was a friendly Indian.) "He's laying for me," Cutler added.

"You've seen him?"

"No. I want to quit my job and go after him."

"Nonsense!" said Powell.

"You can't, Cutler," said Balwin. "I can't spare you."

"You'll be having to fill my place, then, I guess."

"You mean to go without permission?" said Powell, sternly.

"Lord, no! He'll shoot me. That's all."

The two lieutenants pondered.

"And it's to-day," continued Cutler, plaintively, "that he should be gettin' hanged in Cheyenne."

Still the lieutenants pondered, while the wagon-master inspected a photograph of Marie Rose as Marguerite.

"I have it!" exclaimed Powell. "Let's kill him."

"How about the commanding officer?"

"He'd back us--but we'll tell him afterwards. Cutler, can you find Toussaint?"

"If I get the time."

"Very well, you're off duty till you do. Then report to me at once."

Just after guard-mounting two days later, Cutler came in without knocking. Toussaint was found. He was down on the river now, beyond the stockade. In ten minutes the wagon-master and the two lieutenants were rattling down to the agency in an ambulance, behind four tall blue government mules. These were handily driven by a seventeen-year-old boy
whom Balwin had picked up, liking his sterling American ways. He had come West to be a cow-boy, but a chance of helping to impress Red Cloud had seemed still dearer to his heart. They drew up at the agency store, and all went in, leaving the boy nearly out of his mind with curiosity, and pretending to be absorbed with the reins. Presently they came out, Balwin with field-glasses.

"Now," said he, "where?"

"You see the stockade, sir?"

"Well?" said Powell, sticking his chin on Cutler's shoulder to look along his arm as he pouted. But the scout proposed to be deliberate.

"Now the gate of the stockade is this way, ain't it?"

"Well, well?"

"You start there and follow the fence to the corner--the left corner, towards the river. Then you follow the side that's nearest the river down to the other corner. Now that corner is about a hundred yards from the bank. You take a bee-line to the bank and go down stream, maybe thirty yards. No; it'll be forty yards, I guess. There's a lone pine-tree right agin the edge." The wagon-master stopped.

"I see all that," said Lieutenant Balwin, screwing the field-glasses. "There's a buck and a squaw lying under the tree."

"Naw, sir," drawled Cutler, "that ain't no buck. That's him lying in his Injun blanket and chinnin' a squaw."

"Why, that man's an Indian, Cutler. I tell you I can see his braids."

"Oh, he's rigged up Injun fashion, fust rate, sir. But them braids of his ain't his'n. False hair."

The lieutenants passed each other the fieldglasses three times, and glared at the lone pine and the two figures in blankets. The boy on the ambulance was unable to pretend any longer, and leaned off his seat till he nearly fell.

"Well," said Balwin, "I never saw anything look more like a buck Sioux. Look at his paint. Take the glasses yourself, Cutler."

But Cutler refused. "He's like an Injun," he said. "But that's just what he wants to be." The scout's conviction bore down their doubt.

They were persuaded. "You can't come with us, Cutler," said Powell. "You must wait for us here."

"I know, sir; he'd spot us, sure. But it ain't right. I started this whole business with my poker scheme at that cabin, and I ought to stay with it clear through."

The officers went into the agency store and took down two rifles hanging at the entrance, always ready for use. "We're going to kill a man," they explained, and the owner was entirely satisfied. They left the rueful Cutler inside, and proceeded to the gate of the stockade, turning there to the right, away from the river, and following the paling round the corner down to the farther right-hand corner. Looking from behind it, the lone pine-tree stood near, and plain against the sky. The striped figures lay still in their blankets, talking, with their faces to the

river. Here and there across the stream the smoke-stained peak of a tepee showed among the green leaves.

"Did you ever see a more genuine Indian?" inquired Baldwin.

"We must let her rip now, anyhow," said Powell, and they stepped out into the open. They walked towards the pine till it was a hundred yards from them, and the two beneath it lay talking all the while. Balwin covered the man with his rifle and called. The man turned his head, and seeing the rifle, sat up in his blanket. The squaw sat up also. Again the officer called, keeping his rifle steadily pointed, and the man dived like a frog over the bank. Like magic his blanket had left his limbs and painted body naked, except for the breech-clout. Balwin's tardy bullet threw earth over the squaw, who went flapping and screeching down the river. Balwin and Powell ran to the edge, which dropped six abrupt feet of clay to a trail, then shelved into the swift little stream. The red figure was making up the trail to the foot-bridge that led to the Indian houses, and both officers fired. The man continued his limber flight, and they jumped down and followed, firing. They heard a yell on the plain above, and an answer to it, and then confused yells above and below, gathering all the while. The figure ran on above the river trail below the bank, and their bullets whizzed after it.

"Indian!" asserted Balwin, panting.

"Ran away, though," said Powell.

"So'd you run. Think any Sioux'd stay when an army officer comes gunning for him?"

"Shoot!" said Powell. "'S getting near bridge," and they went on, running and firing. The yells all over the plain were thickening. The air seemed like a substance of solid flashing sound. The naked runner

came round the river curve into view of the people at the agency store.

"Where's a rifle?" said Cutler to the agent.

"Officers got 'em," the agent explained.

"Well, I can't stand this," said the scout, and away he went.

"That man's crazy," said the agent.

"You bet he ain't!" remarked the ambulance boy.

Cutler was much nearer to the bridge than was the man in the breech-clout, and reaching the bank, he took half a minute's keen pleasure in watching the race come up the trail. When the figure was within ten yards Cutler slowly drew an ivory-handled pistol. The lieutenants below saw the man leap to the middle of the bridge, sway suddenly with arms thrown up, and topple into White River. The current swept the body down, and as it came it alternately lifted and turned and sank as the stream played with it. Sometimes it struck submerged stumps or shallows, and bounded half out of water, then drew under with nothing but the back of the head in sight, turning round and round. The din of Indians increased, and from the tepees in the cottonwoods the red Sioux began to boil, swarming on the opposite bank, but uncertain what had happened. The man rolling in the water was close to the officers.

"It's not our man," said Balwin. "Did you or I hit him?"

"We're gone, anyhow," said Powell, quietly. "Look!"

A dozen rifles were pointing at their heads on the bank above. The Indians still hesitated, for there was Two Knives telling them these officers were not enemies, and had hurt no Sioux. Suddenly Cutler pushed among the rifles, dashing up the nearest two with his arm, and their

explosion rang in the ears of the lieutenants. Powell stood grinning at the general complication of matters that had passed beyond his control, and Balwin made a grab as the head of the man in the river washed by. The false braid came off in his hand!

"Quick!" shouted Cutler from the bank. "Shove him up here!"

Two Knives redoubled his harangue, and the Indians stood puzzled, while the lieutenants pulled Toussaint out, not dead, but shot through the hip. They dragged him over the clay and hoisted him, till Cutler caught hold and jerked him to the level, as a new noise of rattling descended on the crowd, and the four blue mules wheeled up and halted. The boy had done it himself. Massing the officers' need, he had pelted down among the Sioux, heedless of their yells, and keeping his gray eyes on his team. In got the three, pushing Toussaint in front, and scoured away for the post as the squaw arrived to shriek the truth to her tribe--what Red Cloud's relation had been the victim.

Cutler sat smiling as the ambulance swung along. "I told you I belonged in this here affair," he said. And when they reached the fort he was saying it still, occasionally.

Captain Brent considered it neatly done. "But that boy put the finishing touches," he said. "Let's have him in."

The boy was had in, and ate a dinner with the officers in glum embarrassment, smoking a cigar after it without joy. Toussaint was given into the doctor's hands, and his wounds carefully dressed.

"This will probably cost an Indian outbreak," said Captain Brent, looking down at the plain. Blanketed riders galloped over it, and yelling filled the air. But Toussaint was not destined to cause this further harm. An unexpected influence intervened.

All afternoon the cries and galloping went on, and next morning (worse sign) there seemed to be no Indians in the world. The horizon was empty, the air was silent, the smoking tepees were vanished from the cottonwoods, and where those in the plain had been lay the lodge-poles, and the fires were circles of white, cold ashes. By noon an interpreter came from Red Cloud. Red Cloud would like to have Toussaint. If the white man was not willing, it should be war.

Captain Brent told the story of Loomis and Kelley. "Say to Red Cloud," he ended, "that when a white man does such things among us, he is killed. Ask Red Cloud if Toussaint should live. If he thinks yes, let him come and take Toussaint."

The next day with ceremony and feathers of state, Red Cloud came, bringing his interpreter, and after listening until every word had been told him again, requested to see the half-breed. He was taken to the hospital. A sentry stood on post outside the tent, and inside lay Toussaint, with whom Cutler and the ambulance-boy were playing whiskey-poker. While the patient was waiting to be hanged, he might as well enjoy himself within reason. Such was Cutler's frontier philosophy. We should always do what we can for the sick. At sight of Red Cloud looming in the doorway, gorgeous and grim as Fate, the game was suspended. The Indian took no notice of the white men, and walked to the bed. Toussaint clutched at his relation's fringe, but Red Cloud looked at him. Then the mongrel strain of blood told, and the half-breed poured out a chattering appeal, while Red Cloud by the bedside waited till it had spent itself. Then he grunted, and left the room. He had not spoken, and his crest of long feathers as it turned the corner was the last vision of him that the card-players had.

Red Cloud came back to the officers, and in their presence formally spoke to his interpreter, who delivered the message: "Red Cloud says Toussaint heap no good. No Injun, anyhow. He not want him. White man hunt pretty hard for him. Can keep him."

Thus was Toussaint twice sentenced. He improved under treatment, played
many games of whiskey-poker, and was conveyed to Cheyenne and hanged.

These things happened in the early seventies; but there are Sioux still living who remember the two lieutenants, and how they pulled the half-breed out of White River by his false hair. It makes them laugh to this day. Almost any Indian is full of talk when he chooses, and when he gets hold of a joke he never lets go.

EXTRA MEN
by Harrison Rhodes
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The Best Short Stories of 1918, by Various

The pretty, peaceful Jersey farm-land slopes gently up from the Delaware River to the little hill which Princeton crowns. It is uneventful country. The railway does not cross it, nor any of the great motor trunk roads. On the river itself there is no town of considerable size, though on the map you read the quaint name of Washington Crossing for a little hamlet of a few houses. This will remind you of the great days when on these sleepy fields great history was made. But the fields have lain quiet in the sun now for more than a century, and even the legends of Revolutionary days are for the most part forgotten along these country roads.

As for modern legends, the very phrase seems proof of their impossibility. And in spite of her spacious and resounding past, New Jersey's name now seems to mean incorporations and mosquitoes and sea-bathing and popcorn-crisp rather than either legend or romance. But with the coming of the Great War strange things are stirring in the world, and in the farthest corners of the land the earth is shaken by the tramp of new armies. In the skies by day and night there is a sign. And the things one does not believe can happen may be happening, even in New Jersey.

The small events on the Burridge Road which are here set down cannot even be authenticated. There are people down by the river who say they saw a single horseman go through the village at dusk, but not one seems to know which way he came. There is no ferry at Washington Crossing and the bridge at Lambertville had, since three that afternoon, been closed for repairs. What facts are set down here—and indeed they are scarcely

facts—were acquired because a chauffeur missed the road and a motor then
broke down. What story there is—and indeed there is perhaps not much story—has been pieced together from fragments collected that afternoon and evening. And if the chronicle as now written is vague, it can be urged that, though it all happened so recently as last year, it is already as indeterminate and misty as a legend.

We may, however, begin with undisputed facts. When her grandson enlisted
for the war old Mrs. Buchan became very genuinely dependent on the little farm that surrounded the lovely old Colonial house on the Burridge Road. (Meadows, and horses, and hay and the quality and price of it, have much to do with our story—as, indeed, befits a rural chronicle.) The farm had been larger once, and the hospitality which the old house could dispense more lavish. Indeed, the chief anecdote in its history had been the stopping there once of Washington, to dine and rest on his way to join the army in New York. Old Mrs. Buchan, who, for all her gentleness, was incurably proud, laid special stress on the fact that on _that_ night the great man had not been at an inn—which was in the twentieth century to cheapen his memory by a sign-board appeal to automobile parties—but at a gentleman's house. A gentleman's house it still was; somehow the Buchans had always managed to live like gentlemen. But if George, the gay, agreeable last one of them, could also live that way, it was because his grandmother practised rigid heart-breaking economy. The stories of her shifts and expedients were almost fables of the countryside. When George came home—he had a small
position in a New York broker's office—there was gaiety and plenty. He might well have been deceived into thinking that the little he sent home from New York was ample for her needs. But when he went back his grandmother lived on nothing, or less than that. She dressed for dinner, so they said, in black silk and old lace, had the table laid with Lowestoft china and the Buchan silver, and ate a dish of corn-meal mush,

or something cheaper if that could be found!

George Buchan's enlistment—it was in the aviation service—had been early. And very early he was ordered to France to finish his training there. Two days before he expected his ship to sail the boy got a few hours' furlough and came to the Burridge Road to say good-by to his grandmother.

What was said we must imagine. He was all the old lady had left in the world. But no one ever doubted that she had kissed him and told him to go, and to hold his head high as suited an American and a Buchan. Georgie would perhaps have had no very famous career in Wall Street, but no one doubted that he would make a good soldier. There had always been
a Buchan in the armies of the Republic, his grandmother must have reminded him. And very likely Georgie, kissing her, had reminded her that there had always been a Buchan woman at home to wish the men God
speed as they marched away, and told her too to hold her old head high.

There must have been some talk about the money that there wouldn't be now; without his little weekly check she was indeed almost penniless. It is quite likely that they spoke of selling the house and decided against it. Part of the boy's pay was of course to come to his grandmother, but, as she explained, there were so many war charities needing that, and then the wool for her knitting— She must manage mostly with the farm. There was always the vegetable-garden, and a few chickens, and the green
meadow, which might be expected to yield a record crop of hay.

We may imagine that the two—old lady and boy—stepped out for a moment
into the moonlit night to look at the poor little domain of Buchan that was left. Under the little breeze that drifted up from the Delaware the

grass bent in long waves like those of the summer seas that Georgie was to cross to France. As the Buchans looked at it they might have felt some wonder at the century-old fertility of the soil. Back in the days of the Revolution Washington's horse had pastured there one night. Then, and in 1812, and during the great battle of the States, the grass had grown green and the hay been fragrant, and the fat Jersey earth had out of its depths brought forth something to help the nation at war. Such a field as that by the old white house can scarcely be thought of as a wild, primeval thing; it has lived too long under the hand of man. This was a Buchan field, George's meadow, and by moonlight it seemed to wave good-by to him.

"You aren't dependent on me now, dear," he may have said, with his arm around his grandmother. "I just leave you to our little garden patch and our chickens and the green meadow."

"You mustn't worry, dear. They'll take care of me," she must have answered.

So George went away; and the night after, the night before he sailed, the horseman and his company came.

— — — —

It was at dusk, and a gossamer silvery mist had drifted up from the Delaware. He had hitched his horse by the gate. He was in riding-breeches and gaiters and a rather old-fashioned riding-coat. And in the band of his hat he had stuck a small American flag which looked oddly enough almost like a cockade. He knocked at the door, quite ignoring the new electric bell which George had installed one idle Sunday morning when his grandmother had felt he should have been at church. As it happened, old Mrs. Buchan had been standing by the window,
watching the mist creep up and the twilight come, thinking of Georgie so

soon to be upon the water. As the horseman knocked she, quite suddenly and quite contrary to her usual custom, went herself to the door.

His hat was immediately off, swept through a nobler circle than the modern bow demands, and he spoke with the elaboration of courtesy which
suited his age; for, though his stride was vigorous, he was no longer young. It was a severe, careworn face of a stern, almost hard, nobility of expression. Yet the smile when it came was engaging, and old Mrs. Buchan, as she smiled in return, found herself saying to herself that no Southerner, however stern, could fail to have this graceful lighter side. For his question had been put in the softer accents of Virginia and of the states farther south.

“I’ve lost my way,” he began, with the very slightest, small, gay laugh. But he was instantly serious. “It is so many, many years since I was here.”

Mrs. Buchan pointed up the road.

“That is the way to Princeton.”

“Princeton, of course. That’s where we fought the British and beat them. It seems strange, does it not, that we now fight with them?”

“We must forget the Revolution now, must we not?” This from Mrs. Buchan.

“Forget the Revolution!” he flashed back at her, almost angrily. Then more gently: “Perhaps. If we remember liberty!” He glanced an instant up the road to Princeton hill and then went on. “They fought well then, madam. As a soldier I am glad to have such good allies. But I was forgetting. Yonder lies Princeton, and from there there is the post-road to New York, is there not? I must be in New York by morning.”

Mrs. Buchan was old-fashioned, but she found herself murmuring amazedly
something about railroads and motor-cars. But he did not seem to hear her.

“Yes,” he continued, “I must be in New York by morning. The first transport with our troops sails for France.”

“I know,” she said, proudly. “My grandson, George Buchan, sails for France.”

“George Buchan? There was a George Buchan fought at Princeton, I remember.”

“There was. And another George Buchan in the War of Eighteen-twelve. And
a John in the Mexican War. And a William in eighteen sixty-three. There was no one in the Spanish War—my son was dead and my grandson was too
young. But now he is ready.”

“Every American is ready,” her visitor answered. “I am ready.”

“You?” she broke out. And for the first time she seemed to see that his hair was white. “Are you going?”

“Every one who has ever fought for America is going. There is a company of them behind me. Listen.”

Down the road there was faintly to be heard the clatter of hoofs.

“Some joined me in Virginia, some as we crossed the Potomac by Arlington, where there is a house which once belonged to a relative of

mine. And there were others, old friends, who met me as we came through Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. You would not now know Valley Forge," he finished, half to himself.

The river mist had crept farther up and was a little thicker now. The moon had risen and the mist shimmered and shone almost as if by its own light. The world was indeed of the very substance of a dream. The hoofbeats on the road grew nearer, and at last, while old Mrs. Buchan stood in a kind of amazed silence, they came into sight, even then mere shadowy, dim, wavering figures behind the gossamer silver veil which had drifted there from the lovely Delaware. The horses looked lean and weary, though perhaps this was a trick of the moonlight. Yet they dropped their heads and began eagerly to crop the short, dusty grass by the roadside. The moonlight seemed to play tricks with their riders, too. For in the fog some of them seemed to have almost grotesquely old-fashioned clothes, though all had a sort of military cut to them. Some few, indeed, were trim and modern. But the greater part were, or seemed to Mrs. Buchan to be, in shabby blue or worn gray. The chance combination of the colors struck her. She was an old woman and she could remember unhappy far-off days when blue and gray had stood for the fight of brother against brother. Into her eyes the tears came, yet she suddenly smiled through them—a pair of quite young men lounged toward the fence, and then stood at ease there, the blue-clad arm of one affectionately and boyishly thrown around the other's gray shoulder.

"These go with you?" asked old Mrs. Buchan, still held by her memories.

"Yes. They are of all kinds and all ages, and some of them were not always friends. But you see—" He smiled and pointed to the lads by the fence. "One of them is from Virginia and the other from Ohio. Virginia and Ohio fought once. But I only say that I can remember that Ohio was part of Virginia once long ago. And is not Virginia part of Ohio and Ohio part of Virginia again now? I should be pushing on, however, not talking. It is the horses that are tired, not the men."

“And hungry?” suggested Mrs. Buchan.

“The horses, yes, poor beasts!” he answered. “For the men it does not matter. Yet we must reach New York by morning. And it is a matter of some five-and-fifty miles.”

“Rest a half-hour and let the horses graze. You can make it by sunrise.”

Mrs. Buchan went a little way down the path. It was lined with pink and white clove-pinks and their fragrance was sweet in the night.

“Open the gate there to the left, men,” she called out, and her voice rang, to her, unexpectedly strong and clear. “Let the horses graze in my green meadow if they will.”

They gave an answering cheer from out the mist. She saw the meadow gate
swing open and the lean horses pass through, a long, long file of them.

“But they will spoil your hay crop,” objected the horseman. “And it should be worth a fair sum to you.”

Mrs. Buchan drew herself up. “It is of no consequence,” she answered.

He bowed again.

“But I don’t understand,” she almost pleaded, staring again at his white hair and the little flag in his hatband that looked so oddly like a cockade. “You say you sail to-morrow with my boy?”

“I think you understand as well as any one.”

“Do I?” she whispered. And the night suddenly seemed cold and she drew

her little shawl of Shetland wool more tightly about her shoulders. Yet she was not afraid.

Her guest stooped and, rising, put one of her sweet-smelling clove-pinks in his button-hole.

"If you permit, I will carry it for your boy to France. We are extra men, supercargo," he went on. "We shall cross with every boat-load of boys who sail for France—we who fought once as they must fight now. They
said of me, only too flatteringly, that I was first in peace. Now I must be first in war again. I must be on the first troop-ship that goes. And I shall find friends in France. We have always had friends in France, I imagine, since those first days. Of course, madam, you are too young to remember the Marquis de la Fayette."

"Yes, I am too young," answered old Mrs. Buchan. And she smiled through her tears at the thought of her eighty years.

"You're a mere chit of a girl, of course," he laughed—one of the few times his gravity was relaxed. "Shall I know your boy, I wonder?" Then, without waiting for her answer, "The George Buchan who fought at the battle of Princeton was about twenty-two, slim and straight, with blue eyes and brown hair and an honest, gallant way with him, and a smile that one remembered."

"You will know my boy," she told him. "And I think he will know you, General."

Even now she swears she does not quite know what she meant by this. The
magic of the June night had for the moment made everything possible. Yet she will not to this day say who she thinks the horseman may have been. Only that George would know him, as she had.

“I want them all to know that I am there,” he had replied. “They will know. They will remember their country’s history even as we remember. And when the shells scream in the French sky they will not forget the many times America has fought for liberty. They will not forget those early soldiers. And they will not forget Grant and Lee and Lincoln. The American eagle, madam, has a very shrill note. I think it can be heard above the whistle of German shrapnel.”

— — — —

He drank a glass of sherry before he went, and ate a slice of sponge-cake. Perhaps altogether he delayed a scant quarter of an hour. The lean horses came streaming forth from the green meadow, a long, long
file; and while the moon and the river mist still made it a world of wonder, the company, larger somehow than she had thought it at first, clattered off up the Princeton road toward New York and salt water and the ships.

The mist cleared for a moment and the great green meadow was seen, so trampled that it seemed that a thousand horses must have trampled it. Al Fenton, dignified by Mrs. Buchan as “the farmer,” had now belatedly roused and dressed himself. He stood by the old lady’s side and dejectedly surveyed the ruin of the hay crop. He is a sober, stupid, serious witness of what had happened. And this is important; for when the sun rose, and Mrs. Buchan opened her window, the breeze from the river rippled in long green waves over a great green meadow where the grass still pointed heavenward, untrampled, undisturbed. The Buchan meadow could still, as George had believed it would, take care of his grandmother.

This is the story, to be believed, or not, as you like. They do as they like about it in Jersey. But old Mrs. Buchan believes that with each

American troop-ship there will sail supercargo, extra men. And she believes that with these extra men we cannot lose the fight. George, too, writes home to her that we shall win.

The Project Gutenberg Ebook #24399 of
Criminal Negligence, by Jesse Francis McComas

Somebody was going to have to be left behind ... and who it would be was perfectly obvious....

Warden Halloran smiled slightly. "You expect to have criminals on Mars, then?" he asked. "Is that why you want me?"

"Of course we don't, sir!" snapped the lieutenant general. His name was Knox. "We need men of your administrative ability--"

"Pardon me, general," Lansing interposed smoothly, "I rather think we'd better give the warden a ... a more detailed picture, shall we say? We have been rather abrupt, you know."

"I'd be grateful if you would," Halloran said.

He watched the lanky civilian as Lansing puffed jerkily on his cigar. A long man, with a shock of black hair tumbling over a high, narrow forehead, Lansing had introduced himself as chairman of the project's coördinating committee ... whatever that was.

"Go ahead," grunted Knox. "But make it fast, doctor."

Lansing smiled at the warden, carefully placed his cigar in the ash tray before him and said, "We've been working on the ships night and day. Both the dust itself and its secondary effects are getter closer to us all the time. We've been so intent on the job--it's _really_ been a race against time!--that only yesterday one of my young men remembered the Mountain State Penitentiary was well within our sphere of control."

"The country--what's left of it--has been split up into regions," the

general said. "So many ships to each region."

"So," Lansing went on, "learning about you meant there was another batch of passengers to round up. And when I was told the warden was yourself--I know something of your career, Mr. Halloran--I was delighted. Frankly," he grinned at Knox, "we're long on military and scientific brass and short on people who can manage other people."

"I see." Halloran pressed a buzzer on his desk. "I think some of my associates ought to be in on this discussion."

"Discussion?" barked Knox. "Is there anything to discuss? We simply want you out of here in an hour--"

"Please, general!" the warden said quietly.

* * * * *

If the gray-clad man who entered the office at that moment heard the general's outburst, he gave no sign. He stood stiffly in front of the warden's big desk, a little to one side of the two visitors, and said, "Yes sir, Mr. Halloran?"

"Hello, Joe. Know where the captain is?"

"First afternoon inspection, sir." He cocked an eye at the clock on the wall behind Halloran. "Ought to be in the laundry about now."

The warden scribbled a few words on a small square of paper. "Ask him to come here at once, please. On your way, please stop in at the hospital and ask Dr. Slade to come along, too." He pushed the paper across the desk to the inmate. "There's your pass."

"Yes sir. Anything else, warden?" He stood, a small, square figure in

neat gray shirt and pants, seemingly oblivious to the ill-concealed stares of the two visitors.

Halloran thought a moment, then said, "Yes ... I'd like to see Father Nelson and Rabbi Goldsmid, too."

"Uh, Father Nelson's up on the Row, sir. With Bert Doyle."

"Then we'll not bother him, of course. Just the others."

"Yes, sir. On the double."

Lansing slouched around in his chair and openly watched Joe Mario walk out. Then he turned back to Halloran and said, "That chap a ... a trusty, warden?"

"To a degree. Although we no longer use the term. We classify the inmates according to the amount of responsibility they can handle."

"I see. Ah--" he laughed embarrassedly, "this is the first time I've been in a prison. Mind telling me what his crime was?"

Halloran smiled gently. "We try to remember the man, Dr. Lansing, and not his crime." Then he relented. "Joe Mario was just a small-time crook who got mixed up in a bad murder."

Lansing whistled.

"Aren't we wasting time?" growled the general. "Seems to me, warden, you could be ordering your people to pack up without any conference. You're in charge here, aren't you?"

Halloran raised his eyebrows. "In charge? Why, yes ... in the sense that I shape the final decisions. But all of my assistants contribute to such

decisions. Further, we have an inmate's council that voices its opinion on certain of our problems here. And we--my associates and I--listen to them. Always."

Knox scowled and angrily shifted his big body. Lansing picked up his cigar, relit it, using the action to unobtrusively study the warden. Hardly a presence to cow hardened criminals, Lansing thought. Halloran was just below middle height, with gray hair getting a bit thin, eyes that twinkled warmly behind rimless glasses. Yet Lansing had read somewhere that a critic of Halloran's policies had said the penologist's thinking was far ahead of his time--too far, the critic had added.

* * * * *

As Joe Mario closed the warden's door behind him, two inmates slowed their typing but did not look up as he neared their desks. A guard left his post at the outer door and walked toward Mario. The two of them stopped beside the desks.

"What's the word, Joe?" the guard asked.

Mario held out his pass.

"Gotta round up the captain, Doc Slade and the Jew preacher," he said.

"All right. Get going."

"What do those guys want?" asked a typist as he pulled the paper from his machine.

Mario looked quickly at the guard and as quickly away from him.

"Dunno," he shrugged.

"Somethin' about the war, I bet," grunted the typist.

"War's over, dope," said the other. "Nothin' behind the curtain now but a nice assortment of bomb craters. All sizes."

"Go on, Joe," ordered the guard. "You heard something. Give."

"Well ... I heard that fat general say something about wanting the warden outa here in a hour."

The typewriters stopped their clacking for a bare instant, then started up again, more slowly. The guard frowned, then said, "On your way, Joe." He hesitated, then, "No use to tell you to button your lip, I guess."

"I'm not causing any trouble," Mario said, as the guard opened the door and stood aside for him to pass into the corridor.

O.K.'d for entrance into the hospital wing, Joe Mario stood outside the railing that cut Dr. Slade's reception area off from the corridor that led to the wards. An inmate orderly sat behind the railing, writing a prescription for a slight, intelligent-looking man.

Mario heard the orderly say, "All right, Vukich, get that filled at the dispensary. Take one after each meal and come back to see us when the bottle's empty. Unless the pain gets worse, of course. But I don't think it will."

"Thanks, doc," the patient drawled.

Both men looked up then and saw Mario.

"Hi, Joe," the orderly smiled. "What's wrong with you? You don't look sick!"

"Nothin' wrong with me that a day outside couldn't cure."

"Or a _night_," laughed Vukich.

Mario ran a hand over his sleek, black hair. "Better a night, sure," he grinned back. Then he sobered and said to the orderly, "Warden wants to see the doc. Right away."

"Mr. Halloran sick?"

"Naw ... it's business. Urgent business."

"Real urgent, Joe? The doc's doing a pretty serious exam right now."

Mario paused, then said, "You guys might as well know about it. There's a general and a civilian in the warden's office. They're talkin' about something outside. Warden wants the doc in on it."

Sudden tension flowed out between the three men. Down the hall, a patient screamed suddenly in the psycho ward. The three of them jerked, then grinned feebly at each other.

Vukich said slowly, "Well, you don't start playing catch with atom bombs without dropping a few. Wonder what it's like ... out there?"

"We haven't _heard_ that it's any different," the orderly's voice lacked conviction.

"Don't be silly," Vukich said flatly. "Ever since they moved the dames from Tehama into C block we've known _something_ happened."

"Get the doc," Mario said. "I've got to be on my way."

"Me, too." Vukich's thin, clever face looked thoughtful.

The others stared blankly at him and said nothing.

* * * * *

As Alfred Court, captain of the prison, strode down the flower-bordered path that led from the shops unit past A block to the administration building, a side door in A block clanged open and a sergeant came out. The sergeant turned without seeing his superior and walked hurriedly toward the administration wing.

"Hey, sarge!" Court called. "What's the hurry?"

The sergeant whirled, recognized the captain and quickly saluted.

"Glad to see you, sir," he said. "Just the man I was looking for!"

"Good enough. What's on your mind? Better tell me as we go for the warden's in a hurry to see me."

The two men walked abreast, both big, although Court lacked any trace of the sergeant's paunch. As they walked and talked, their eyes darted continually about, unconsciously checking the appearance of the buildings, the position of the guard in the gun tower, the attitude of a very old inmate who was meticulously weeding a flower bed.

"Captain, you going to let the men out for their yard time?"

Court's pace slowed. "Why not?"

"No real reason ... _now_. But there's trouble in the air, sir. I can smell it. The whole place is buzzing ... with _something_."

"With what?"

"I can't put my finger on it. But all the men know there's some pretty big shots--at least one general, they say--in the warden's office, right now. There's a hot rumor that there's trouble outside--some sort of disaster."

Court laughed shortly. "That Mario! He's going to lose a nice job if he doesn't keep his mouth shut!"

"None of them keep their mouths shut, captain."

"Yes ... well, I don't know what's up, myself. I'm heading for that conference right now. I'll ask the warden about letting the men out of their cells. What's their attitude?"

The sergeant's broad, red face grew more troubled.

"Uh ... the men aren't hostile, captain. They seem worried, nervous ... kind of scared. If somebody at the top--the warden or yourself--could convince them things were as usual outside ... they'd quiet down, I'm sure."

They were now thirty feet from the door to the administration building a door that opened for but one man at a time. The officers stopped.

"Things are _not_ normal outside," Court growled, "and you know it. I've been wondering how long this prison could go on--as if there were still a state's capital, with its Adult Authority, its governor, its Supreme Court. D'you think every man jack here doesn't know a visit from the Authority's long overdue!"

"Yeah--"

"Well, I'll go in, sarge, and see what's what. If you _don't_ hear from

me, stick to routine."

"Right, captain."

He remained where he was while Captain Court walked slowly toward the door, both hands well in sight. A pace from the door he stopped and exchanged a few words with someone watching him through a barred peephole. After a moment, the door slid open and he walked into the building.

He was the last to arrive at the warden's office. Lansing gazed at him in fascination. Goldsmid had been a Golden Gloves champion middleweight
before he had heeded the call of the Law, and he looked it. Dr. Slade was the prototype of all overworked doctors. But Court was a type by himself. Lansing thought he'd never seen a colder eye. Yet, the captain's lean face--so unlike the warden's mild, scholarly one--was quiet, composed, unmarked by any weakness of feature or line of self-indulgence. A big, tough man, Lansing mused, a very tough man. But a just one.

* * * * *

"I've a problem, warden," Court said when the introductions were over. "Something we should decide right away."

"Can't it wait?" Knox said irritably.

Lansing almost choked with stifled laughter when Court just glanced briefly at Knox, then said quietly to the warden, "Sergeant Haines has just advised me that the inmates know about these gentlemen and they're--restless. I wonder if we shouldn't keep the men in their cells this afternoon.'"

"Blast it!" roared Knox. "Can't you people keep a secret?"

"There are no secrets in prison, general," Halloran said mildly. "I learned that my first week as a guard, twenty years ago." To Court he said, "Sit down, Alfred. Unless you disagree strongly, I think we'll let the men out as usual. It's a risk, yes, but right now, the closer we stick to normal routine, the better."

"You're probably right, sir."

Court sat down and Halloran turned to his two visitors.

"Now, gentlemen," he smiled, "we're at your disposal. As I told you, my two associate wardens aren't here. Mr. Briggs is in town and Mr. Tate is home ill. Dr. McCall, our Protestant clergyman, is also home, recovering from a siege with one of those pesky viruses. But we here represent various phases of our administration and can certainly answer all of your questions."

"Questions!" Knox snorted. "We're here to tell you the facts--not ask."

"General," soothed Lansing. He looked across the desk at Halloran and shrugged slightly. The warden twinkled. "General Knox is a trifle ... ah, overblunt, but he's telling you the essential truth of the situation. We've come to take you away from here. Just as soon as you can leave."

"Hey?" cried Slade. "Leave here? The devil, man, I've got to take out a gall bladder this afternoon!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," murmured Goldsmid. "I thought the war was over--"

"This is all nonsense!" There was an ominous note in Knox's hoarse

voice. "Do you people realize you're now under the authority of the Fifth Defense Command?"

Lansing cried: "Let's be sensible about all this!" He pointed his cigar at the fuming soldier. "General, these gentlemen have every right to know the situation and we'll save time if you'll permit me to give them a quick briefing."

"All right! All right!"

"Well, then." Lansing crossed his long legs, glanced nervously about the room, and said, "The world as we know it is done with. Finished. In another week it will be completely uninhabitable."

[Illustration]

"Hey," grunted Slade. "You Lansing, the physicist?"

"That's right, doctor."

"Didn't place you at first. Well, what's going to end this lousy old world of ours?"

"Well," Lansing answered, "we wiped out our late antagonists with skill and dispatch. But, in the end, they outsmarted us. Left behind some sort of radioactive dust which ... _spreads_. It's rolling down on us from Chicago and up from Texas. God knows what other parts of the country are
like--we haven't had time to discuss it with them on the radio."

Goldsmid muttered something in Hebrew.

"Isn't that lack of communication rather odd?" asked the warden.

"Not so very. We've been too busy building rocket ships."

"Rocket ships!" Court was jarred out of his icy calm.

"You mean spaceships?" cried the doctor.

"Yes, Slade, they do," murmured the warden.

"Precisely," Lansing said. "When it looked as if the cold war would get rather warm, the allied governments faced up to the fact that our venerable planet might become a ... ah, a battle casualty. So, in carefully selected regions, rather extensive preparations were made for a hurried departure from this sector of the universe."

"Oh, come to the point!" Knox exploded. "All you people need to know is that one of those regions is this area of the Rocky Mountains, that the ships are built and ready to go, and that you're to get aboard. Fast!"

"That," nodded Lansing, "is it."

* * * * *

The four prison officials looked at each other. Halloran and Court sat quiet; Goldsmid slowly dropped his eyes to the ground and his lips moved. Slade scratched his chin.

"Going to Mars, hey?" he asked abruptly.

"That's our destination."

The doctor chuckled. "Comic-book stuff," he chortled.

"No, it isn't," Halloran said. "We've been expecting something like this for a long time. Haven't we?"

"Indeed we have," Goldsmid said. "Expecting, but not quite believing."

Halloran looked thoughtfully at the physicist. "Dr. Lansing, these ships of yours ... they're pretty big, I take it?"

"Not as big as we like. They never are. But they'll do. Why?"

"I should remind you that we have well over two thousand inmates here."

"Inmates!" barked the general. "Who the devil said anything about your inmates? Think we'll take a lot of convicts to Mars! Populate it with killers, thieves--"

"Who does go, then?" Halloran did not raise his voice but Knox looked suddenly uneasy.

"Why ... uh, your operating personnel," he replied gruffly. "Your guards, clerks ... hell, man, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid that is out," Goldsmid said. "For me, that is." He stood up, a heavy-shouldered middleweight running a little to fat. "Excuse me, warden, my counseling period's coming up."

"Sit down, Pete," Halloran said quietly. "We haven't finished this conference."

"I admire your sentiments, Rabbi," Lansing said hurriedly, "but surely you realize that we can't take any criminal elements to ... ah, what will be our new world. And we do have a special need for you. We've plenty of your co-religionists among our various personnel, but we don't have an ordained minister for them. They're your responsibility."

"Afraid my first responsibility is here." Goldsmid's voice was quite

matter-of-fact.

"So's mine," grunted Slade. "Warden, even if the world ends tomorrow, I've got to get Squeaker Hanley's gall bladder out today. No point in my hanging around any longer is there?"

"Of course there is," Halloran answered. He took a package of cigarettes from his pocket, selected one, and lit it. He exhaled smoke and looked speculatively at Lansing. The scientist felt himself blushing and looked away.

Halloran turned to Court.

"Quite a problem, isn't it, Alfred," he said. "I suppose these gentlemen are right in keeping the inmates off their ships. At any rate, _we_ can't argue the matter--so let's do what we're asked. I think you'd better plan to get the guards out of here tonight, at shift change. Might pass the word to their wives now, so they can start packing a few essentials. Doc," he turned to Slade, "before you get your greedy hands on Squeaker's gall bladder, you'd better round up your staff and have them make the proper arrangements."

"O.K., I'll put it up to them."

"You'll _not_ put it up to them," the warden said sharply. "You'll _order_ them to be ready when the general, here, wants them."

"I'll give no orders," Slade said grimly.

"Just a minute," interposed Court. "Sir, aren't you going?"

"Of course not. But that's neither here nor there--"

The loud clangor of a bell pealed through the room. The two visitors

jumped.

"What's that?" cried Knox.

"Yard time," Halloran smiled. "The men are allowed two hours out in the yard, now. They exercise, play games, or just sit around and talk."

"Oh."

"Did I understand you correctly, Warden Halloran?" Lansing's bony face was pale now. "Do you refuse to come with us?"

* * * * *

When the bell rang, Joe Mario had been standing near the door to the warden's office, ostensibly filing reports. Now, he closed the drawer with a bang, stretched, and started toward the outside door.

"Where are you going?" the guard asked suspiciously.

"The yard. Where else?"

"Not a word," Mario added virtuously. "I was too busy doin' my work. Anyway, you gotta let me out. My team's got a ball game set for this afternoon."

"Oh ... all right." He looked at the typists. "How about you two? Want out?"

The two men glanced quickly at each other, then shoved back their chairs and got up from their desks.

"Sure," one of them grinned, "I guess we'll take a little air."

* * * * *

Lansing had the feeling he used to have occasionally, back in his university days when he lectured on freshman physics--as if he were talking to a class of deaf students. For, like the hapless freshmen, Warden Halloran was quite obviously not listening to him. But the scientist plunged on. "Sir," he said hoarsely, "we need you. We _will_ need you! I'm a scientist--I know nothing of the problems of ... ah, community living. Neither does Knox. He's accustomed to major crises--and solving them by giving orders. But both of us know there'll come a time when people won't take orders--"

"Absolutely correct," Knox said unexpectedly. "Once we get settled on Mars, the military takes a back seat. And--I mean this, Lansing--_I'll_ be damn' glad of it. When the people get their towns built they'll need some gents with the right kind know-how to help them, show them--"

"That's all very interesting, general, but it's not for me."

"Why not?"

Halloran snubbed out his cigarette, looked up at the general and at the scientist. He smiled briefly. "It's just my job, gentlemen--let's not discuss the matter any further. You can't make me go."

"We will!" barked Knox. "I told you you were under the jurisdiction of the Fifth Defense Command and you are. If I want to, I can send a tank company over here and drag you to those ships!"

"He's right, you know," Lansing said.

Court stood up and took one step toward the general.

"Alfred!" the warden did not lift his voice, but Court stopped. "General

Knox," Halloran went on in a conversational tone, "you're being a bit of bully, you know, and in this prison we've all been ... ah, conditioned against bullies." He looked down at his desk and frowned. "However, I'll admit that your position requires that I elaborate my reasons for staying here. Well, then. As I see it, your people, your ... ah, colonists, can help themselves. Most of _my_ people, the inmates here, can't. A long time ago, gentlemen, I decided I'd spend my life helping the one man in our society who seemingly can't help himself, the so-called criminal. I've always felt that society owes a debt to the criminal ... instead of the other way around."

He hesitated, grinned apologetically at Captain Court. "I'm sermonizing again, eh, Alfred? But," he shrugged, "if I must get dramatic about it I can only say that my life's work ends only with my--death."

"It's quite a rough job, you know," Goldsmid remarked. "This is a maximum security institution. Too many of the inmates have disappointed the warden. But he keeps trying and we've learned to follow his example."

"Our psychiatric bunch have done some mighty interesting things," beamed
Slade, "even with cases that looked absolutely hopeless."

"None of them can be saved now," muttered Lansing.

"That is in the hands of God," Goldsmid replied.

"Well," Halloran said gently, "still going to send those tanks after me, general?"

"Uh ... no ... I won't interfere with a man doing his duty."

Lansing cleared his throat, looked slowly from the somber-faced

clergyman, to the fidgeting medico, to the burly captain, still staring impassively at the general, to, finally, the quiet, smiling warden. "Gentlemen," he said slowly, "it occurs to me that the situation hasn't actually registered on you. The earth is really doomed, you know. This dust simply won't tolerate organic life. In some way--we have not had time to discover how--it's self-multiplying, so, as I said, it spreads. Right now, not a tenth of this entire continent--from the pole down to the Panama Canal--is capable of supporting any kind of life as we know it. And that area is diminishing hourly."

"No way of checking it?" Slade asked. His tone was one of idle curiosity, nothing else.

"No. It's death, gentlemen. As deadly as your ... ah, gallows."

"We use the gas chamber," Halloran corrected him. His mouth twisted. "More humane, you know."

There was brief quiet, then the warden said, "Well ... now that we've finished philosophizing, let's get back to the matter at hand. We can have everyone that's going ready to leave by seven tonight. Will that be satisfactory?"

"It'll have to be," Knox grunted.

"Thank you." Halloran reached for his phone, then dropped his hands on his desk. "I'd like to ask you a question," he said. "Perhaps it's presumptuous, but I'm rather curious about the ... er, last workings of our government. Tell me, don't you really have room for our inmates? You haven't told us how many ships you've built. Or how big they are."

Lansing looked at Knox. The general flushed, then stared at the floor. Lansing shrugged tiredly.

"Oh, we've plenty of room," he sighed. "But ... our orders are to take only those completely fit to build a new world. We've ... well, we have practiced a lot of euthanasia lately."

"Judges," murmured Goldsmid.

"If you had come sooner," there was no anger in Halloran's voice, "couldn't you have selected some of our people, those that I ... all of us know are ready for rehabilitation--even on another planet?"

"Perhaps. But no one remembered there was a prison nearby."

The warden looked at the rabbi. Goldsmid raised his heavy shoulders in an ancient Hebraic gesture.

"That was always the trouble, wasn't it, Pete?" Halloran murmured. "People never remembered the prisons!"

The telephone beside him shrilled loudly, urgently.

* * * * *

The inmate mopping the floor of Condemned Row's single corridor slowed in front of Bert Doyle's cell. Doyle was slated for a ride down the elevator that night to the death cell behind the gas chamber. At the moment, he was stretched out on his bunk, listening to the soft voice of Father Nelson.

"Sorry to interrupt," the inmate said, "but I thought you'd like to know that all hell's busting loose down in the yard."

Father Nelson looked up.

Doyle, too, looked interested. "A riot?" he asked.

"Yessiree, bob!"

"Nonsense!" snapped the priest. "This prison doesn't have riots!"

"Well, it's sure got one, now. 'Scuse me, Father, but it's the truth. The men grabbed four or five yard guards and the screws in the towers don't dare shoot!"

He gave up all pretense of work and stood, leaning on his mop-handle, his rheumy old eyes glowing with a feverish excitement.

Nelson stood up.

"Will you excuse me, Bert?" he asked. "I'd better see if I can help the warden."

Doyle, too, sat up, swung his feet to the steel floor, stood up and stretched. "Sure," he said. His hard face was pale but otherwise he seemed quite calm. "You've been a great help, Father." He looked quizzically at the old inmate. "You lying, Danny? Seems to me the boys have got nothing to beef about here."

"Heh, they sure have now."

"What?"

"Well, I got this from a guy who got it from Vukich who heard it from Joe Mario. Seems there's a big-shot general and some kinda scientist in Mr. Halloran's office." He shifted his grip on the mop-handle. "You gents maybe won't believe this, but it's what Joe heard 'em say to the warden. Outside is all covered with radium and this general and this here scientist are goin' to Mars an' they want the warden to go along. Leavin' us behind, of course. That's what the boys are riotin' about."

Bert Doyle burst into harsh laughter.

"Danny! Danny!" he cried. "I've been predicting this! You've gone stir-bugs!"

"Ain't neither!"

"Just a moment, Bert," Nelson whispered. Aloud he said, "Dan, go call the guard for me, please." When the old man had shuffled out of earshot the priest said to the condemned man, "It could be true, Bert. By radium, he means radioactive material. And there's no reason spaceships can't get to Mars. We'd reached the Moon before the war started, you know."

Doyle sank back on his bunk.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he breathed.

"Bert!"

Doyle grinned sheepishly. "Force of habit." Then, more soberly, "So they're off to Mars, eh? Father, you better get down there and pick up your reservations!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" The priest's voice softened and he patted the killer's shoulder. "I will go down and see what's what, Bert. And I'll be back just as soon as the men have quieted down. That is, if they _are_ creating a disturbance."

The footsteps of the approaching guard sounded loud in the corridor. Doyle frowned a little.

"When you come back, Father, you'll tell me the truth? No kidding, now!"

The guard stood in front of the door of heavy steel bars. Father Nelson looked down at the man on the bunk.

"I'll tell you everything, Bert. I swear it."

"Uh, Father?" the guard's voice was nervous--and embarrassed.

"Yes, Perkins?"

"I ... I can't let you out right now. Orders from the warden. Not a cell door opens till I hear from him direct."

[Illustration]

Doyle chuckled.

"Might as well sit down, Father," he said, "and make yourself comfortable--"

* * * * *

"What will you do?" cried Lansing.

"Go out and talk to them, of course," replied Halloran. He arose from his desk, a calm, unhurried man.

"Look," growled Knox, "you get me through to the town. Some of our people are still there. I'll order out as many soldiers as you want. I'll see to it that they get here--on the double!"

Halloran flushed. "Would it ease your conscience, general," he grated, "if you killed off my men instead of leaving them--behind! Now, you will please keep quiet. You'll be perfectly safe!"

"What will we do with them, sir?" Court gestured at Lansing and Knox.

Halloran strode from behind his desk to the opposite end of the room. As he twirled the dials of a wall safe he said, "They'll have to remain here, for now. The men have got between this building and the gate office." The safe swung open and he reached far inside and took out a submachine gun. "Here," he held the weapon out to Court. "If I don't come back, use this to get them to the gate office."

"Didn't know you had an arsenal in here!" cried Slade.

"No one else did, either, except Alfred. Now Doc, think you and Pete had better stay here."

Slade and Goldsmid pulled themselves out of their chairs as one man. Their timing was perfect.

"No, you don't, hero!" growled Slade.

"Warden," Goldsmid said, "perhaps _I_ could talk to the men--"

The warden smiled and walked toward the door. There he stopped and said
to Court, "Switch on the speaker system, Alfred. I'll take the portable mike from the next office. While I'm out there, get word to all custodial and operating personnel that they will be permitted to leave tonight. Meantime, I hope they will stay on their jobs. Better phone Mr. Tate, have someone try to locate Mr. Briggs, be sure and call Dr. Slade's staff."

"Right, sir."

The three men left the office. Court, the gun cradled under one arm,

picked up the phone and spoke into it. His voice was a low, crisp monotone. After a while, he replaced the receiver and stood quiet, staring impassively at the others.

"You might say the warden's career has been twenty years of futility," he muttered. Lansing and Knox felt he wasn't actually speaking to them. "Now me, I'm a screw of the old school. Hardboiled, they say. _I_ never expected a thing from a con ... and cons have lied to him, politicians have broken their promises ... but the liars have loved him and the dumbest dope in the legislature has respected him."

"Will he ... be all right?" Lansing asked.

Court shrugged. "Who knows? You handled this very badly," he said dispassionately. "Five minutes after you stepped through the main gate every inmate in the place knew you were here and started wondering. Why didn't you write--make arrangements to see the warden outside?"

"I'm sorry," Lansing said. "We know very little about prisons."

Court laughed shortly. "You'd better learn," he said grimly.

"Anyway we can see what's going on?" rumbled Knox. "And how about that
speaker business?"

"There's a window in the next office. Come along."

* * * * *

They crouched at the window, the fat Knox whizzing a little, because Court had ordered them to keep out of sight of the rioters. They saw Halloran, Slade and Goldsmid at his heels, walking out into the small courtyard that lay between them and safety. Over the wall speaker came a

sullen roar, something very like the ragged blast of a rocket whose timing is off. A few gray-clad men in the courtyard saw the approaching warden, surged toward him, screaming at their fellows in the big yard behind them.

Halloran ignored the clutching hands. He held the mike up and they heard him say, "There's no point in my talking with you unless you will be quiet and listen." He paused. The roar slowly subsided into an angry mutter. "Thanks. That's better."

Now, they could see Slade's head but both Halloran and the rabbi were hidden by the swirl of gray figures that swept around the three prison officials.

"Now," the warden went on, "it seems that you have something to say to me. Good enough. But why didn't you send word through your council, instead of roughing up guards, damaging property, yelling your heads off and generally behaving like a bunch of spoiled brats. Go on, tell me! Why?"

Someone's scream came clearly over the mike. "The world's coming to an end! They're leaving us here to die!"

"Yeah!" the mike picked up another voice. "How about that?"

Before the wordless, mindless roar could rise again, the warden barked, "Oh, hush up!" And they were quiet.

"My God," breathed Lansing.

"Now," Halloran's voice was easy, assured, "I want to make sure that all of you hear me. So, I'm coming out in the center of the yard. Rabbi Pete Goldsmid and Doc Slade insist on coming with me although," he chuckled, "I understand Squeaker Hanley's screaming for the doc to cut out his

gall bladder." A few of the men laughed. "All right, here I come. And you fellows behind me, keep off the wire. I don't want this mike to go dead and have to yell my lungs out."

They saw the eddy of men around him move slowly through the broken gate
and out of their sight.

"What will he tell them," muttered Knox.

"Whatever--they'll believe it," Court said. The courtyard before them was now empty. He stared thoughtfully out the barred window, then said, "Think you could get to the gate office pretty soon, now--"

"No!" snarled Knox. "I want to see what happens to that gutty so-and-so!"

Lansing grinned nervously. "Somehow, captain, I feel it won't be necessary for us to sneak out of here."

* * * * *

They listened again while assorted thieves, murderers, rapists, men--save for an innocent few--whose hands were consistently raised against their fellows' peace and property, heard their jailor tell them that the end of their world, a world that many of them remembered but dimly, was coming to an end. The screaming broke out again when Halloran
spoke of the Mars-bound ships, and, for a moment, the three in the office thought he had lost control. But the amplifiers prevailed and Halloran laughed and said, "Anyway, we're not going to Mars--"

"_You_ can go!"

The man who yelled that was apparently very close to the warden within his view, for they heard him say: "Chrisman, you're a fool--as usual! Would I bother to come out here and talk to you if I could go?"

That got them. That, they understood. If a guy didn't scram from a hot spot when he could ... well, then, he couldn't scram in the first place. So, the warden was stuck, just like they were.

Later, perhaps, a few of them might figure out why.

"Now, let's have no more interruptions," Halloran said. "_I_ don't think there's any need to go. Neither does the doc, here, or the rabbi. We're all staying--because the desert to the south of us has stopped the spread of this dust and it seems it can't cross the rivers, either. So, we're safe enough."

"But that's not true," groaned Lansing.

Court glanced at him. "Would you tell them different?" he said coldly.

"No--"

Halloran said, "Well, that's that. Life is a little difficult outside and so the people out there want to try to get to Mars. Believe me, that's a trip I want someone else to make first. But if they think life will be easier on those deserts--why, let them go. But God help them--they'll need it."

He paused. Knox tried to catch Lansing's eye, but the scientist's face was blank, unseeing.

"What do _we_ do?" This voice was not hysterical, just seriously questioning.

"_You_ should do darned well. Life should be easy enough for _you_. You've got your own farms, your livestock, laundry, hospital, shops--everything a man can need. So, take over and run things to suit yourselves."

A unanimous gasp whistled over the speaker. Then, they all cried just one word.

"Us?"

"Why not? Don't you think you can?"

Silence, broken by strange, wistful mutterings.

"I'd suggest this," Halloran said. "Let's follow our normal routine tonight--no lock-ups, of course--and tomorrow, you fellows take over. I'll help you in any way I can. But it will be _your_ job. Perhaps after breakfast tomorrow, you ought to have a mass meeting. Under the supervision of your council, I'd say. You can't keep going without some kind of order, you know."

Again silence.

"My God," whispered Lansing, "he makes it all sound so _real_."

"Any questions?" Halloran asked.

"Hey, warden! How about the dames?"

"The ladies will join you tomorrow morning." He chuckled. "I imagine they'll be able to handle you all right!"

A joyous roar.

"However," Halloran raised his voice, "I'd like to remind you fellows that a successful community needs ... _families_!"

There was a long quiet, then, broken finally by an inmate who asked, "Warden, how about the guys up on the Row?"

"Well," Halloran's voice lost all humor, "you can start ripping out the gas chamber whenever you're ready to. I'll see that you get the tools."

The swell of applause was so loud in the office that Court hastily turned down the speaker's volume.

"All right," Halloran said when they had quieted down, "that's about it. You're free now, till supper-time. I'd suggest all of you start right now, thinking about your future--"

* * * * *

Outside the main gate, first Knox, then Lansing shook hands with the gray-faced warden.

"Trucks'll be in town at seven for your people," Knox muttered. He gave a windy sigh. "It's all fouled up. As usual. Damn it, we need people like you, sir!"

Lansing looked at Halloran for a long time, trying to see behind the mask of exhaustion. "I'm a mannerless fool," he said at last. "But Mr. Halloran, would you tell me what you're thinking? I mean, really thinking? Even if it's rough on us!"

Halloran laughed softly. "I wasn't thinking about you at all, Dr. Lansing. I was--and am--regretting that what I told the men couldn't be the truth. It's too bad they'll have so short a time. It would be very interesting to see what they would do with--_life_."

Knox scowled. "Seems like they haven't done much with it so far."

"Come along, general," Lansing said quietly. "You don't understand. None of us do. We never did."

THE END

THE MASTER OF MYSTERY
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Children of the Frost, by Jack London

There was complaint in the village. The women chattered together with shrill, high-pitched voices. The men were glum and doubtful of aspect, and the very dogs wandered dubiously about, alarmed in vague ways by the unrest of the camp, and ready to take to the woods on the first outbreak of trouble. The air was filled with suspicion. No man was sure of his neighbor, and each was conscious that he stood in like unsureness with his fellows. Even the children were oppressed and solemn, and little Di Ya, the cause of it all, had been soundly thrashed, first by Hooniah, his mother, and then by his father, Bawn, and was now whimpering and looking pessimistically out upon the world from the shelter of the big overturned canoe on the beach.

And to make the matter worse, Scundoo, the shaman, was in disgrace, and his known magic could not be called upon to seek out the evil-doer. Forsooth, a month gone, he had promised a fair south wind so that the tribe might journey to the _potlatch_ at Tonkin, where Taku Jim was giving away the savings of twenty years; and when the day came, lo, a grievous north wind blew, and of the first three canoes to venture forth, one was swamped in the big seas, and two were pounded to pieces on the rocks, and a child was drowned. He had pulled the string of the wrong bag, he explained,--a mistake. But the people refused to listen; the offerings of meat and fish and fur ceased to come to his door; and he sulked within--so they thought, fasting in bitter penance; in reality, eating generously from his well-stored cache and meditating upon the fickleness of the mob.

The blankets of Hooniah were missing. They were good blankets, of most marvellous thickness and warmth, and her pride in them was greatened in that they had been come by so cheaply. Ty-Kwan, of the next village but one, was a fool to have so easily parted with them. But then,

she did not know they were the blankets of the murdered Englishman, because of whose take-off the United States cutter nosed along the coast for a time, while its launches puffed and snorted among the secret inlets. And not knowing that Ty-Kwan had disposed of them in haste so that his own people might not have to render account to the Government, Hooniah's pride was unshaken. And because the women envied
her, her pride was without end and boundless, till it filled the village and spilled over along the Alaskan shore from Dutch Harbor to St. Mary's. Her totem had become justly celebrated, and her name known on the lips of men wherever men fished and feasted, what of the blankets and their marvellous thickness and warmth. It was a most mysterious happening, the manner of their going.

"I but stretched them up in the sun by the side-wall of the house," Hooniah disclaimed for the thousandth time to her Thlinget sisters. "I but stretched them up and turned my back; for Di Ya, dough-thief and eater of raw flour that he is, with head into the big iron pot, overturned and stuck there, his legs waving like the branches of a forest tree in the wind. And I did but drag him out and twice knock his head against the door for riper understanding, and behold, the blankets were not!"

"The blankets were not!" the women repeated in awed whispers.

"A great loss," one added. A second, "Never were there such blankets." And a third, "We be sorry, Hooniah, for thy loss." Yet each woman of them was glad in her heart that the odious, dissension-breeding blankets were gone. "I but stretched them up in the sun," Hooniah began for the thousand and first time.

"Yea, yea," Bawn spoke up, wearied. "But there were no gossips in the village from other places. Wherefore it be plain that some of our own tribespeople have laid unlawful hand upon the blankets."

"How can that be, O Bawn?" the women chorussed indignantly. "Who should there be?"

"Then has there been witchcraft," Bawn continued stolidly enough, though he stole a sly glance at their faces.

"_Witchcraft!_" And at the dread word their voices hushed and each looked fearfully at each.

"Ay," Hooniah affirmed, the latent malignancy of her nature flashing into a moment's exultation. "And word has been sent to Klok-No-Ton, and strong paddles. Truly shall he be here with the afternoon tide."

The little groups broke up, and fear descended upon the village. Of all misfortune, witchcraft was the most appalling. With the intangible and unseen things only the shamans could cope, and neither man, woman,
nor child could know, until the moment of ordeal, whether devils possessed their souls or not. And of all shamans, Klok-No-Ton, who dwelt in the next village, was the most terrible. None found more evil spirits than he, none visited his victims with more frightful tortures. Even had he found, once, a devil residing within the body of a three-months babe--a most obstinate devil which could only be driven out when the babe had lain for a week on thorns and briers. The body was thrown into the sea after that, but the waves tossed it back again and again as a curse upon the village, nor did it finally go away till two strong men were staked out at low tide and drowned.

And Hooniah had sent for this Klok-No-Ton. Better had it been if Scundoo, their own shaman, were undisgraced. For he had ever a gentler way, and he had been known to drive forth two devils from a man who afterward begat seven healthy children. But Klok-No-Ton! They shuddered with dire foreboding at thought of him, and each one felt

himself the centre of accusing eyes, and looked accusingly upon his fellows--each one and all, save Sime, and Sime was a scoffer whose evil end was destined with a certitude his successes could not shake.

"Hoh! Hoh!" he laughed. "Devils and Klok-No-Ton!--than whom no greater devil can be found in Thlinket Land."

"Thou fool! Even now he cometh with witcheries and sorceries; so beware thy tongue, lest evil befall thee and thy days be short in the land!"

So spoke La-lah, otherwise the Cheater, and Sime laughed scornfully.

"I am Sime, unused to fear, unafraid of the dark. I am a strong man, as my father before me, and my head is clear. Nor you nor I have seen with our eyes the unseen evil things--"

"But Scundoo hath," La-lah made answer. "And likewise Klok-No-Ton. This we know."

"How dost thou know, son of a fool?" Sime thundered, the choleric blood darkening his thick bull neck.

"By the word of their mouths--even so."

Sime snorted. "A shaman is only a man. May not his words be crooked, even as thine and mine? Bah! Bah! And once more, bah! And this for thy shamans and thy shamans' devils! and this! and this!"

And snapping his fingers to right and left, Sime strode through the on-lookers, who made over-zealous and fearsome way for him.

"A good fisher and strong hunter, but an evil man," said one.

"Yet does he flourish," speculated another.

"Wherefore be thou evil and flourish," Sime retorted over his shoulder. "And were all evil, there would be no need for shamans. Bah! You children-afraid-of-the-dark!"

And when Klok-No-Ton arrived on the afternoon tide, Sime's defiant laugh was unabated; nor did he forbear to make a joke when the shaman tripped on the sand in the landing. Klok-No-Ton looked at him sourly, and without greeting stalked straight through their midst to the house of Scundoo.

Of the meeting with Scundoo none of the tribespeople might know, for they clustered reverently in the distance and spoke in whispers while the masters of mystery were together.

"Greeting, O Scundoo!" Klok-No-Ton rumbled, wavering perceptibly from doubt of his reception.

He was a giant in stature, and towered massively above little Scundoo, whose thin voice floated upward like the faint far rasping of a cricket.

"Greeting, Klok-No-Ton," he returned. "The day is fair with thy coming."

"Yet it would seem ..." Klok-No-Ton hesitated.

"Yea, yea," the little shaman put in impatiently, "that I have fallen on ill days, else would I not stand in gratitude to you in that you do my work."

"It grieves me, friend Scundoo ..."

"Nay, I am made glad, Klok-No-Ton."

"But will I give thee half of that which be given me."

"Not so, good Klok-No-Ton," murmured Scundoo, with a deprecatory wave of the hand. "It is I who am thy slave, and my days shall be filled with desire to befriend thee."

"As I--"

"As thou now befriendest me."

"That being so, it is then a bad business, these blankets of the woman Hooniah?"

The big shaman blundered tentatively in his quest, and Scundoo smiled a wan, gray smile, for he was used to reading men, and all men seemed very small to him.

"Ever hast thou dealt in strong medicine," he said. "Doubtless the evil-doer will be briefly known to thee."

"Ay, briefly known when I set eyes upon him." Again Klok-No-Ton hesitated. "Have there been gossips from other places?" he asked.

Scundoo shook his head. "Behold! Is this not a most excellent mucluc?"

He held up the foot-covering of sealskin and walrus hide, and his visitor examined it with secret interest.

"It did come to me by a close-driven bargain."

Klok-No-Ton nodded attentively.

"I got it from the man La-lah. He is a remarkable man, and often have I thought ..."

"So?" Klok-No-Ton ventured impatiently.

"Often have I thought," Scundoo concluded, his voice falling as he came to a full pause. "It is a fair day, and thy medicine be strong, Klok-No-Ton."

Klok-No-Ton's face brightened. "Thou art a great man, Scundoo, a shaman of shamans. I go now. I shall remember thee always. And the man La-lah, as you say, is a remarkable man."

Scundoo smiled yet more wan and gray, closed the door on the heels of his departing visitor, and barred and double-barred it.

Sime was mending his canoe when Klok-No-Ton came down the beach, and
he broke off from his work only long enough to ostentatiously load his rifle and place it near him.

The shaman noted the action and called out: "Let all the people come together on this spot! It is the word of Klok-No-Ton, devil-seeker and driver of devils!"

He had been minded to assemble them at Hooniah's house, but it was necessary that all should be present, and he was doubtful of Sime's obedience and did not wish trouble. Sime was a good man to let alone, his judgment ran, and withal, a bad one for the health of any shaman.

"Let the woman Hooniah be brought," Klok-No-Ton commanded, glaring ferociously about the circle and sending chills up and down the spines of those he looked upon.

Hooniah waddled forward, head bent and gaze averted.

"Where be thy blankets?"

"I but stretched them up in the sun, and behold, they were not!" she whined.

"So?"

"It was because of Di Ya."

"So?"

"Him have I beaten sore, and he shall yet be beaten, for that he brought trouble upon us who be poor people."

"The blankets!" Klok-No-Ton bellowed hoarsely, foreseeing her desire to lower the price to be paid. "The blankets, woman! Thy wealth is known."

"I but stretched them up in the sun," she sniffled, "and we be poor people and have nothing."

He stiffened suddenly, with a hideous distortion of the face, and Hooniah shrank back. But so swiftly did he spring forward, with in-turned eyeballs and loosened jaw, that she stumbled and fell down grovelling at his feet. He waved his arms about, wildly flagellating the air, his body writhing and twisting in torment. An epilepsy seemed to come upon him. A white froth flecked his lips, and his body was convulsed with shiverings and tremblings.

The women broke into a wailing chant, swaying backward and forward in abandonment, while one by one the men succumbed to the excitement till only Sime remained. He, perched upon his canoe, looked on in mockery;

yet the ancestors whose seed he bore pressed heavily upon him, and he swore his strongest oaths that his courage might be cheered. Klok-No-Ton was horrible to behold. He had cast off his blanket and torn his clothes from him, so that he was quite naked, save for a girdle of eagle-claws about his thighs. Shrieking and yelling, his long black hair flying like a blot of night, he leaped frantically about the circle. A certain rude rhythm characterized his frenzy, and when all were under its sway, swinging their bodies in accord with his and venting their cries in unison, he sat bolt upright, with arm outstretched and long, talon-like finger extended. A low moaning, as of the dead, greeted this, and the people cowered with shaking knees as the dread finger passed them slowly by. For death went with it, and life remained with those who watched it go; and being rejected, they watched with eager intentness.

Finally, with a tremendous cry, the fateful finger rested upon La-lah. He shook like an aspen, seeing himself already dead, his household goods divided, and his widow married to his brother. He strove to speak, to deny, but his tongue clove to his mouth and his throat was sanded with an intolerable thirst. Klok-No-Ton seemed to half swoon away, now that his work was done; but he waited, with closed eyes, listening for the great blood-cry to go up--the great blood-cry, familiar to his ear from a thousand conjurations, when the tribespeople flung themselves like wolves upon the trembling victim. But only was there silence, then a low tittering, from nowhere in particular, which spread and spread until a vast laughter welled up to the sky.

"Wherefore?" he cried.

"Na! Na!" the people laughed. "Thy medicine be ill, O Klok-No-Ton!"

"It be known to all," La-lah stuttered. "For eight weary months have I been gone afar with the Siwash sealers, and but this day am I come

back to find the blankets of Hooniah gone ere I came!"

"It be true!" they cried with one accord. "The blankets of Hooniah were gone ere he came!"

"And thou shalt be paid nothing for thy medicine which is of no avail," announced Hooniah, on her feet once more and smarting from a sense of ridiculousness.

But Klok-No-Ton saw only the face of Scundoo and its wan, gray smile, heard only the faint far cricket's rasping. "I got it from the man La-lah, and often have I thought," and, "It is a fair day and thy medicine be strong."

He brushed by Hooniah, and the circle instinctively gave way for him to pass. Sime flung a jeer from the top of the canoe, the women snickered in his face, cries of derision rose in his wake, but he took no notice, pressing onward to the house of Scundoo. He hammered on the door, beat it with his fists, and howled vile imprecations. Yet there was no response, save that in the lulls Scundoo's voice rose eerily in incantation. Klok-No-Ton raged about like a madman, but when he attempted to break in the door with a huge stone, murmurs arose from the men and women. And he, Klok-No-Ton, knew that he stood shorn of his strength and authority before an alien people. He saw a man stoop for a stone, and a second, and a bodily fear ran through him.

"Harm not Scundoo, who is a master!" a woman cried out.

"Better you return to your own village," a man advised menacingly.

Klok-No-Ton turned on his heel and went down among them to the beach, a bitter rage at his heart, and in his head a just apprehension for his defenceless back. But no stones were cast. The children swarmed mockingly about his feet, and the air was wild with laughter and

derision, but that was all. Yet he did not breathe freely until the canoe was well out upon the water, when he rose up and laid a futile curse upon the village and its people, not forgetting to particularly specify Scundoo who had made a mock of him.

Ashore there was a clamor for Scundoo, and the whole population crowded his door, entreating and imploring in confused babel till he came forth and raised his hand.

"In that ye are my children I pardon freely," he said. "But never again. For the last time thy foolishness goes unpunished. That which ye wish shall be granted, and it be already known to me. This night, when the moon has gone behind the world to look upon the mighty dead, let all the people gather in the blackness before the house of Hooniah. Then shall the evil-doer stand forth and take his merited reward. I have spoken."

"It shall be death!" Bawn vociferated, "for that it hath brought worry upon us, and shame."

"So be it," Scundoo replied, and shut his door.

"Now shall all be made clear and plain, and content rest upon us once again," La-lah declaimed oracularly.

"Because of Scundoo, the little man," Sime sneered.

"Because of the medicine of Scundoo, the little man," La-lah corrected.

"Children of foolishness, these Thlinket people!" Sime smote his thigh a resounding blow. "It passeth understanding that grown women and strong men should get down in the dirt to dream-things and wonder tales."

"I am a travelled man," La-lah answered. "I have journeyed on the deep seas and seen signs and wonders, and I know that these things be so. I am La-lah--"

"The Cheater--"

"So called, but the Far-Journeyer right-named."

"I am not so great a traveller--" Sime began.

"Then hold thy tongue," Bawn cut in, and they separated in anger.

When the last silver moonlight had vanished beyond the world, Scundoo came among the people huddled about the house of Hooniah. He walked with a quick, alert step, and those who saw him in the light of Hooniah's slush-lamp noticed that he came empty-handed, without rattles, masks, or shaman's paraphernalia, save for a great sleepy raven carried under one arm.

"Is there wood gathered for a fire, so that all may see when the work be done?" he demanded.

"Yea," Bawn answered. "There be wood in plenty."

"Then let all listen, for my words be few. With me have I brought Jelchs, the Raven, diviner of mystery and seer of things. Him, in his blackness, shall I place under the big black pot of Hooniah, in the blackest corner of her house. The slush-lamp shall cease to burn, and all remain in outer darkness. It is very simple. One by one shall ye go into the house, lay hand upon the pot for the space of one long intake of the breath, and withdraw again. Doubtless Jelchs will make outcry when the hand of the evil-doer is nigh him. Or who knows but otherwise he may manifest his wisdom. Are ye ready?"

"We be ready," came the multi-voiced response.

"Then will I call the name aloud, each in his turn and hers, till all are called."

Thereat La-lah was first chosen, and he passed in at once. Every ear strained, and through the silence they could hear his footsteps creaking across the rickety floor. But that was all. Jelchs made no outcry, gave no sign. Bawn was next chosen, for it well might be that a man should steal his own blankets with intent to cast shame upon his neighbors. Hooniah followed, and other women and children, but without result.

"Sime!" Scundoo called out.

"Sime!" he repeated.

But Sime did not stir.

"Art thou afraid of the dark?" La-lah, his own integrity being proved, demanded fiercely.

Sime chuckled. "I laugh at it all, for it is a great foolishness. Yet will I go in, not in belief in wonders, but in token that I am unafraid."

And he passed in boldly, and came out still mocking.

"Some day shalt thou die with great suddenness," La-lah whispered, righteously indignant.

"I doubt not," the scoffer answered airily. "Few men of us die in our beds, what of the shamans and the deep sea."

When half the villagers had safely undergone the ordeal, the excitement, because of its repression, was painfully intense. When two-thirds had gone through, a young woman, close on her first child-bed, broke down and in nervous shrieks and laughter gave form to her terror.

Finally the turn came for the last of all to go in, and nothing had happened. And Di Ya was the last of all. It must surely be he. Hooniah let out a lament to the stars, while the rest drew back from the luckless lad. He was half-dead from fright, and his legs gave under him so that he staggered on the threshold and nearly fell. Scundoo shoved him inside and closed the door. A long time went by, during which could be heard only the boy's weeping. Then, very slowly, came the creak of his steps to the far corner, a pause, and the creaking of his return. The door opened and he came forth. Nothing had happened, and he was the last.

"Let the fire be lighted," Scundoo commanded.

The bright flames rushed upward, revealing faces yet marked with vanishing fear, but also clouded with doubt.

"Surely the thing has failed," Hooniah whispered hoarsely.

"Yea," Bawn answered complacently. "Scundoo groweth old, and we stand in need of a new shaman."

"Where now is the wisdom of Jelchs?" Sime snickered in La-lah's ear.

La-lah brushed his brow in a puzzled manner and said nothing.

Sime threw his chest out arrogantly and strutted up to the little shaman. "Hoh! Hoh! As I said, nothing has come of it!"

"So it would seem, so it would seem," Scundoo answered meekly. "And it would seem strange to those unskilled in the affairs of mystery."

"As thou?" Sime queried audaciously.

"Mayhap even as I." Scundoo spoke quite softly, his eyelids drooping, slowly drooping, down, down, till his eyes were all but hidden. "So I am minded of another test. Let every man, woman, and child, now and at once, hold their hands well up above their heads!"

So unexpected was the order, and so imperatively was it given, that it was obeyed without question. Every hand was in the air.

"Let each look on the other's hands, and let all look," Scundoo commanded, "so that--"

But a noise of laughter, which was more of wrath, drowned his voice. All eyes had come to rest upon Sime. Every hand but his was black with soot, and his was guiltless of the smirch of Hooniah's pot.

A stone hurtled through the air and struck him on the cheek.

"It is a lie!" he yelled. "A lie! I know naught of Hooniah's blankets!"

A second stone gashed his brow, a third whistled past his head, the great blood-cry went up, and everywhere were people groping on the ground for missiles. He staggered and half sank down.

"It was a joke! Only a joke!" he shrieked. "I but took them for a joke!"

"Where hast thou hidden them?" Scundoo's shrill, sharp voice cut

through the tumult like a knife.

"In the large skin-bale in my house, the one slung by the ridge-pole," came the answer. "But it was a joke, I say, only--"

Scundoo nodded his head, and the air went thick with flying stones. Sime's wife was crying silently, her head upon her knees; but his little boy, with shrieks and laughter, was flinging stones with the rest.

Hooniah came waddling back with the precious blankets. Scundoo stopped her.

"We be poor people and have little," she whimpered. "So be not hard upon us, O Scundoo."

The people ceased from the quivering stone-pile they had builded, and looked on.

"Nay, it was never my way, good Hooniah," Scundoo made answer, reaching for the blankets. "In token that I am not hard, these only shall I take."

"Am I not wise, my children?" he demanded.

"Thou art indeed wise, O Scundoo!" they cried in one voice.

And he went away into the darkness, the blankets around him, and Jelchs nodding sleepily under his arm.

NO CHARGE FOR ATTENDANCE.
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Cobwebs From an Empty Skull, by Ambrose Bierce (aka Dod Grile)

Near the road leading from Deutscherkirche to Lagerhaus may be seen the ruins of a little cottage. It never was a very pretentious pile, but it has a history. About the middle of the last century it was occupied by one Heinrich Schneider, who was a small farmer--so small a farmer his clothes wouldn't fit him without a good deal of taking-in. But Heinrich Schneider was young. He had a wife, however--most small farmers have when young. They were rather poor: the farm was just large enough to keep them comfortably hungry.

Schneider was not literary in his taste; his sole reading was an old dog's-eared copy of the "Arabian Nights" done into German, and in that he read nothing but the story of "Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp." Upon his five hundredth perusal of that he conceived a valuable idea: he would rub _his_ lamp and _corral_ a Genie! So he put a thick leather glove on his right hand, and went to the cupboard to get out the lamp. He had no lamp. But this disappointment, which would have been instantly fatal to a more despondent man, was only an agreeable stimulus to him. He took out an old iron candle-snuffer, and went to work upon that.

Now, iron is very hard; it requires more rubbing than any other metal. I once chafed a Genie out of an anvil, but I was quite weary before I got him all out; the slightest irritation of a leaden water-pipe would have fetched the same Genie out of it like a rat from his hole. But having planted all his poultry, sown his potatoes, and set out his wheat, Heinrich had the whole summer before him, and he was patient; he devoted all his time to compelling the attendance of the Supernatural.

When the autumn came, the good wife reaped the chickens, dug out the

apples, plucked the pigs and other cereals; and a wonderfully abundant harvest it was. Schneider's crops had flourished amazingly. That was because he did not worry them all summer with agricultural implements. One evening when the produce had been stored, Heinrich sat at his fireside operating upon his candle-snuffer with the same simple faith as in the early spring. Suddenly there was a knock at the door, and the expected Genie put in an appearance. His advent begot no little surprise in the good couple.

He was a very substantial incarnation, indeed, of the Supernatural. About eight feet in length, extremely fat, thick-limbed, ill-favoured, heavy of movement, and generally unpretty, he did not at first sight impress his new master any too favourably.

However, he was given a stool at the fireside, and Heinrich plied him with a multitude of questions: Where did he come from? whom had he last served? how did he like Aladdin? and did he think _they_ should get on well? To all these queries the Genie returned evasive answers; he was Delphic to the verge of unintelligibility. He would only nod mysteriously, muttering beneath his breath in some unknown tongue, probably Arabic--in which, however, his master thought he could distinguish the words "roast" and "boiled" with significant frequency. This Genie must have served last in the capacity of cook.

This was a gratifying discovery: for the next four months or so there would be nothing to do about the farm; the Slave could prepare the family meals during the winter, and in the spring go regularly to work. Schneider was too shrewd to risk everything by extravagant demands all at once. He remembered the roc's egg of the legend, and thought he would proceed with caution. So the good couple brought out their cooking utensils, and by pantomime inducted the Slave into the mystery of their use. They showed him the larder, the cellars, the granary, the chicken-coops, and everything. He appeared interested and intelligent, apprehended the salient points of the situation with

marvellous ease, and nodded like he would drop his big head off--did everything but talk.

After this the _frau_ prepared the evening meal, the Genie assisting very satisfactorily, except that his notions of quantity were rather too liberal; perhaps this was natural in one accustomed to palaces and courts. When all was on the table, by way of testing his Slave's obedience Heinrich sat down at the board and carelessly rubbed the candle-snuffer. The Genie was there in a second! Not only so, but he fell upon the viands with an ardour and sincerity that were alarming. In two minutes he had got away with everything on the table. The rapidity with which that spirit crowded all manner of edibles into his neck was simply shocking!

Having finished his repast he stretched himself before the fire and went to sleep. Heinrich and Barbara were depressed in spirit; they sat up until nearly morning in silence, waiting for the Genie to vanish for the night; but he did not perceptibly vanish any. Moreover, he had not vanished next morning; he had risen with the lark, and was preparing breakfast, having made his estimates upon a basis of most immoderate consumption. To this he soon sat down with the same catholicity of appetite that had distinguished him the previous evening. Having bolted this preposterous breakfast he arrayed his fat face in a sable scowl, beat his master with a stewpan, stretched himself before the fire, and again addressed himself to sleep. Over a furtive and clandestine meal in the larder, Heinrich and Barbara confessed themselves thoroughly heart-sick of the Supernatural.

"I told you so," said he; "depend upon it, patient industry is a thousand per cent. better than this invisible agency. I will now take the fatal candle-snuffer a mile from here, rub it real hard, fling it aside, and run away."

But he didn't. During the night ten feet of snow had fallen. It lay

all winter too.

Early the next spring there emerged from that cottage by the wayside the unstable framework of a man dragging through seas of melting snow a tottering female of dejected aspect. Forlorn, crippled, famishing, and discouraged, these melancholy relics held on their way until they came to a cross-roads (all leading to Lagerhaus), where they saw clinging to an upright post the tatter of an old placard. It read as follows:

> LOST, strayed, or stolen, from Herr Schaackhofer's Grand Museum, the celebrated Patagonian Giant, Ugolulah. Height 8 ft. 2 in., elegant figure, handsome, intelligent features, sprightly and vivacious in conversation, of engaging address, temperate in diet, harmless and tractable in disposition. Answers to the nickname of Fritz Sneddeker. Any one returning him to Herr Schaackhofer will receive Seven Thalers Reward, and no questions asked.

It was a tempting offer, but they did not go back for the giant. But he was afterwards discovered sleeping sweetly upon the hearthstone, after a hearty meal of empty barrels and boxes. Being secured he was found to be too fat for egress by the door. So the house was pulled down to let him out; and that is how it happens to be in ruins now.

The Altar of the Dead, by Henry James
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CHAPTER I.

He had a mortal dislike, poor Stransom, to lean anniversaries, and loved them still less when they made a pretence of a figure. Celebrations and suppressions were equally painful to him, and but one of the former found a place in his life. He had kept each year in his own fashion the date of Mary Antrim's death. It would be more to the point perhaps to say that this occasion kept him: it kept him at least effectually from doing anything else. It took hold of him again and again with a hand of which time had softened but never loosened the touch. He waked to his feast of memory as consciously as he would have waked to his marriage-morn. Marriage had had of old but too little to say to the matter: for the girl who was to have been his bride there had been no bridal embrace. She had died of a malignant fever after the wedding-day had been fixed, and he had lost before fairly tasting it an affection that promised to fill his life to the brim.

Of that benediction, however, it would have been false to say this life could really be emptied: it was still ruled by a pale ghost, still ordered by a sovereign presence. He had not been a man of numerous passions, and even in all these years no sense had grown stronger with him than the sense of being bereft. He had needed no priest and no altar to make him for ever widowed. He had done many things in the world - he had done almost all but one: he had never, never forgotten. He had tried to put into his existence whatever else might take up room in it, but had failed to make it more than a house of which the mistress was eternally absent. She was most absent of all on the recurrent December day that his tenacity set apart. He had no arranged observance of it, but his nerves

made it all their own. They drove him forth without mercy, and the goal of his pilgrimage was far. She had been buried in a London suburb, a part then of Nature's breast, but which he had seen lose one after another every feature of freshness. It was in truth during the moments he stood there that his eyes beheld the place least. They looked at another image, they opened to another light. Was it a credible future? Was it an incredible past? Whatever the answer it was an immense escape from the actual.

It's true that if there weren't other dates than this there were other memories; and by the time George Stransom was fifty-five such memories had greatly multiplied. There were other ghosts in his life than the ghost of Mary Antrim. He had perhaps not had more losses than most men, but he had counted his losses more; he hadn't seen death more closely, but had in a manner felt it more deeply. He had formed little by little the habit of numbering his Dead: it had come to him early in life that there was something one had to do for them. They were there in their simplified intensified essence, their conscious absence and expressive patience, as personally there as if they had only been stricken dumb. When all sense of them failed, all sound of them ceased, it was as if their purgatory were really still on earth: they asked so little that they got, poor things, even less, and died again, died every day, of the hard usage of life. They had no organised service, no reserved place, no honour, no shelter, no safety. Even ungenerous people provided for the living, but even those who were called most generous did nothing for the others. So on George Stransom's part had grown up with the years a resolve that he at least would do something, do it, that is, for his own - would perform the great charity without reproach. Every man had his own, and every man had, to meet this charity, the ample resources of the soul.

It was doubtless the voice of Mary Antrim that spoke for them best; as the years at any rate went by he found himself in regular communion with these postponed pensioners, those whom indeed he always called in his thoughts the Others. He spared them the moments, he organised the

charity. Quite how it had risen he probably never could have told you, but what came to pass was that an altar, such as was after all within everybody's compass, lighted with perpetual candles and dedicated to these secret rites, reared itself in his spiritual spaces. He had wondered of old, in some embarrassment, whether he had a religion; being very sure, and not a little content, that he hadn't at all events the religion some of the people he had known wanted him to have. Gradually this question was straightened out for him: it became clear to him that the religion instilled by his earliest consciousness had been simply the religion of the Dead. It suited his inclination, it satisfied his spirit, it gave employment to his piety. It answered his love of great offices, of a solemn and splendid ritual; for no shrine could be more bedecked and no ceremonial more stately than those to which his worship was attached. He had no imagination about these things but that they were accessible to any one who should feel the need of them. The poorest could build such temples of the spirit - could make them blaze with candles and smoke with incense, make them flush with pictures and flowers. The cost, in the common phrase, of keeping them up fell wholly on the generous heart.

CHAPTER II.

He had this year, on the eve of his anniversary, as happened, an emotion not unconnected with that range of feeling. Walking home at the close of a busy day he was arrested in the London street by the particular effect of a shop-front that lighted the dull brown air with its mercenary grin and before which several persons were gathered. It was the window of a jeweller whose diamonds and sapphires seemed to laugh, in flashes like high notes of sound, with the mere joy of knowing how much more they were "worth" than most of the dingy pedestrians staring at them from the other side of the pane. Stransom lingered long enough to suspend, in a vision, a string

of pearls about the white neck of Mary Antrim, and then was kept an instant longer by the sound of a voice he knew. Next him was a mumbling old woman, and beyond the old woman a gentleman with a lady on his arm. It was from him, from Paul Creston, the voice had proceeded: he was talking with the lady of some precious object in the window. Stransom had no sooner recognised him than the old woman turned away; but just with this growth of opportunity came a felt strangeness that stayed him in the very act of laying his hand on his friend's arm. It lasted but the instant, only that space sufficed for the flash of a wild question. Was not Mrs. Creston dead? - the ambiguity met him there in the short drop of her husband's voice, the drop conjugal, if it ever was, and in the way the two figures leaned to each other. Creston, making a step to look at something else, came nearer, glanced at him, started and exclaimed - behaviour the effect of which was at first only to leave Stransom staring, staring back across the months at the different face, the wholly other face, the poor man had shown him last, the blurred ravaged mask bent over the open grave by which they had stood together. That son of affliction wasn't in mourning now; he detached his arm from his companion's to grasp the hand of the older friend. He coloured as well as smiled in the strong light of the shop when Stransom raised a tentative hat to the lady. Stransom had just time to see she was pretty before he found himself gaping at a fact more portentous. "My dear fellow, let me make you acquainted with my wife."

Creston had blushed and stammered over it, but in half a minute, at the rate we live in polite society, it had practically become, for our friend, the mere memory of a shock. They stood there and laughed and talked; Stransom had instantly whisked the shock out of the way, to keep it for private consumption. He felt himself grimace, he heard himself exaggerate the proper, but was conscious of turning not a little faint. That new woman, that hired performer, Mrs. Creston? Mrs. Creston had been more living for him than any woman but one. This lady had a face that shone as publicly as the jeweller's window, and in the happy candour with which she wore her monstrous character was an effect of gross immodesty. The character of Paul Creston's wife thus attributed to her was monstrous for reasons

Stransom could judge his friend to know perfectly that he knew. The happy pair had just arrived from America, and Stransom hadn't needed to be told this to guess the nationality of the lady. Somehow it deepened the foolish air that her husband's confused cordiality was unable to conceal. Stransom recalled that he had heard of poor Creston's having, while his bereavement was still fresh, crossed the sea for what people in such predicaments call a little change. He had found the little change indeed, he had brought the little change back; it was the little change that stood there and that, do what he would, he couldn't, while he showed those high front teeth of his, look other than a conscious ass about. They were going into the shop, Mrs. Creston said, and she begged Mr. Stransom to come with them and help to decide. He thanked her, opening his watch and pleading an engagement for which he was already late, and they parted while she shrieked into the fog, "Mind now you come to see me right away!" Creston had had the delicacy not to suggest that, and Stransom hoped it hurt him somewhere to hear her scream it to all the echoes.

He felt quite determined, as he walked away, never in his life to go near her. She was perhaps a human being, but Creston oughtn't to have shown her without precautions, oughtn't indeed to have shown her at all. His precautions should have been those of a forger or a murderer, and the people at home would never have mentioned extradition. This was a wife for foreign service or purely external use; a decent consideration would have spared her the injury of comparisons. Such was the first flush of George Stransom's reaction; but as he sat alone that night - there were particular hours he always passed alone - the harshness dropped from it and left only the pity. He could spend an evening with Kate Creston, if the man to whom she had given everything couldn't. He had known her twenty years, and she was the only woman for whom he might perhaps have been unfaithful. She was all cleverness and sympathy and charm; her house had been the very easiest in all the world and her friendship the very firmest. Without accidents he had loved her, without accidents every one had loved her: she had made the passions about her as regular as the moon makes the tides. She had been also of course far too good for her

husband, but he never suspected it, and in nothing had she been more admirable than in the exquisite art with which she tried to keep every one else (keeping Creston was no trouble) from finding it out. Here was a man to whom she had devoted her life and for whom she had given it up - dying to bring into the world a child of his bed; and she had had only to submit to her fate to have, ere the grass was green on her grave, no more existence for him than a domestic servant he had replaced. The frivolity, the indecency of it made Stransom's eyes fill; and he had that evening a sturdy sense that he alone, in a world without delicacy, had a right to hold up his head. While he smoked, after dinner, he had a book in his lap, but he had no eyes for his page: his eyes, in the swarming void of things, seemed to have caught Kate Creston's, and it was into their sad silences he looked. It was to him her sentient spirit had turned, knowing it to be of her he would think. He thought for a long time of how the closed eyes of dead women could still live - how they could open again, in a quiet lamplit room, long after they had looked their last. They had looks that survived - had them as great poets had quoted lines.

The newspaper lay by his chair - the thing that came in the afternoon and the servants thought one wanted; without sense for what was in it he had mechanically unfolded and then dropped it. Before he went to bed he took it up, and this time, at the top of a paragraph, he was caught by five words that made him start. He stood staring, before the fire, at the "Death of Sir Acton Hague, K.C.B.," the man who ten years earlier had been the nearest of his friends and whose deposition from this eminence had practically left it without an occupant. He had seen him after their rupture, but hadn't now seen him for years. Standing there before the fire he turned cold as he read what had befallen him. Promoted a short time previous to the governorship of the Westward Islands, Acton Hague had died, in the bleak honour of this exile, of an illness consequent on the bite of a poisonous snake. His career was compressed by the newspaper into a dozen lines, the perusal of which excited on George Stransom's part no warmer feeling than one of relief at the absence of any mention of their quarrel, an incident accidentally tainted at the time, thanks to their joint immersion in

large affairs, with a horrible publicity. Public indeed was the wrong Stransom had, to his own sense, suffered, the insult he had blankly taken from the only man with whom he had ever been intimate; the friend, almost adored, of his University years, the subject, later, of his passionate loyalty: so public that he had never spoken of it to a human creature, so public that he had completely overlooked it. It had made the difference for him that friendship too was all over, but it had only made just that one. The shock of interests had been private, intensely so; but the action taken by Hague had been in the face of men. To-day it all seemed to have occurred merely to the end that George Stransom should think of him as "Hague" and measure exactly how much he himself could resemble a stone. He went cold, suddenly and horribly cold, to bed.

CHAPTER III.

The next day, in the afternoon, in the great grey suburb, he knew his long walk had tired him. In the dreadful cemetery alone he had been on his feet an hour. Instinctively, coming back, they had taken him a devious course, and it was a desert in which no circling cabman hovered over possible prey. He paused on a corner and measured the dreariness; then he made out through the gathered dusk that he was in one of those tracts of London which are less gloomy by night than by day, because, in the former case of the civil gift of light. By day there was nothing, but by night there were lamps, and George Stransom was in a mood that made lamps good in themselves. It wasn't that they could show him anything, it was only that they could burn clear. To his surprise, however, after a while, they did show him something: the arch of a high doorway approached by a low terrace of steps, in the depth of which - it formed a dim vestibule - the raising of a curtain at the moment he passed gave him a glimpse of an avenue of gloom with a glow of tapers at the end. He stopped and looked

up, recognising the place as a church. The thought quickly came to him that since he was tired he might rest there; so that after a moment he had in turn pushed up the leathern curtain and gone in. It was a temple of the old persuasion, and there had evidently been a function - perhaps a service for the dead; the high altar was still a blaze of candles. This was an exhibition he always liked, and he dropped into a seat with relief. More than it had ever yet come home to him it struck him as good there should be churches.

This one was almost empty and the other altars were dim; a verger shuffled about, an old woman coughed, but it seemed to Stransom there was hospitality in the thick sweet air. Was it only the savour of the incense or was it something of larger intention? He had at any rate quitted the great grey suburb and come nearer to the warm centre. He presently ceased to feel intrusive, gaining at last even a sense of community with the only worshipper in his neighbourhood, the sombre presence of a woman, in mourning unrelieved, whose back was all he could see of her and who had sunk deep into prayer at no great distance from him. He wished he could sink, like her, to the very bottom, be as motionless, as rapt in prostration. After a few moments he shifted his seat; it was almost indelicate to be so aware of her. But Stransom subsequently quite lost himself, floating away on the sea of light. If occasions like this had been more frequent in his life he would have had more present the great original type, set up in a myriad temples, of the unapproachable shrine he had erected in his mind. That shrine had begun in vague likeness to church pomps, but the echo had ended by growing more distinct than the sound. The sound now rang out, the type blazed at him with all its fires and with a mystery of radiance in which endless meanings could glow. The thing became as he sat there his appropriate altar and each starry candle an appropriate vow. He numbered them, named them, grouped them - it was the silent roll-call of his Dead. They made together a brightness vast and intense, a brightness in which the mere chapel of his thoughts grew so dim that as it faded away he asked himself if he shouldn't find his real comfort in some material act, some outward worship.

This idea took possession of him while, at a distance, the black-robed lady continued prostrate; he was quietly thrilled with his conception, which at last brought him to his feet in the sudden excitement of a plan. He wandered softly through the aisles, pausing in the different chapels, all save one applied to a special devotion. It was in this clear recess, lampless and unapplied, that he stood longest - the length of time it took him fully to grasp the conception of gilding it with his bounty. He should snatch it from no other rites and associate it with nothing profane; he would simply take it as it should be given up to him and make it a masterpiece of splendour and a mountain of fire. Tended sacredly all the year, with the sanctifying church round it, it would always be ready for his offices. There would be difficulties, but from the first they presented themselves only as difficulties surmounted. Even for a person so little affiliated the thing would be a matter of arrangement. He saw it all in advance, and how bright in especial the place would become to him in the intermissions of toil and the dusk of afternoons; how rich in assurance at all times, but especially in the indifferent world. Before withdrawing he drew nearer again to the spot where he had first sat down, and in the movement he met the lady whom he had seen praying and who was now on her way to the door. She passed him quickly, and he had only a glimpse of her pale face and her unconscious, almost sightless eyes. For that instant she looked faded and handsome.

This was the origin of the rites more public, yet certainly esoteric, that he at last found himself able to establish. It took a long time, it took a year, and both the process and the result would have been - for any who knew - a vivid picture of his good faith. No one did know, in fact - no one but the bland ecclesiastics whose acquaintance he had promptly sought, whose objections he had softly overridden, whose curiosity and sympathy he had artfully charmed, whose assent to his eccentric munificence he had eventually won, and who had asked for concessions in exchange for indulgences. Stransom had of course at an early stage of his enquiry been referred to the Bishop, and the Bishop had been delightfully human, the

Bishop had been almost amused. Success was within sight, at any rate from the moment the attitude of those whom it concerned became liberal in response to liberality. The altar and the sacred shell that half encircled it, consecrated to an ostensible and customary worship, were to be splendidly maintained; all that Stransom reserved to himself was the number of his lights and the free enjoyment of his intention. When the intention had taken complete effect the enjoyment became even greater than he had ventured to hope. He liked to think of this effect when far from it, liked to convince himself of it yet again when near. He was not often indeed so near as that a visit to it hadn't perforce something of the patience of a pilgrimage; but the time he gave to his devotion came to seem to him more a contribution to his other interests than a betrayal of them. Even a loaded life might be easier when one had added a new necessity to it.

How much easier was probably never guessed by those who simply knew there were hours when he disappeared and for many of whom there was a vulgar reading of what they used to call his plunges. These plunges were into depths quieter than the deep sea-caves, and the habit had at the end of a year or two become the one it would have cost him most to relinquish. Now they had really, his Dead, something that was indefensibly theirs; and he liked to think that they might in cases be the Dead of others, as well as that the Dead of others might be invoked there under the protection of what he had done. Whoever bent a knee on the carpet he had laid down appeared to him to act in the spirit of his intention. Each of his lights had a name for him, and from time to time a new light was kindled. This was what he had fundamentally agreed for, that there should always be room for them all. What those who passed or lingered saw was simply the most resplendent of the altars called suddenly into vivid usefulness, with a quiet elderly man, for whom it evidently had a fascination, often seated there in a maze or a doze; but half the satisfaction of the spot for this mysterious and fitful worshipper was that he found the years of his life there, and the ties, the affections, the struggles, the submissions, the conquests, if there had been such, a record of that adventurous journey in which the beginnings

and the endings of human relations are the lettered mile-stones. He had in general little taste for the past as a part of his own history; at other times and in other places it mostly seemed to him pitiful to consider and impossible to repair; but on these occasions he accepted it with something of that positive gladness with which one adjusts one's self to an ache that begins to succumb to treatment. To the treatment of time the malady of life begins at a given moment to succumb; and these were doubtless the hours at which that truth most came home to him. The day was written for him there on which he had first become acquainted with death, and the successive phases of the acquaintance were marked each with a flame.

The flames were gathering thick at present, for Stransom had entered that dark defile of our earthly descent in which some one dies every day. It was only yesterday that Kate Creston had flashed out her white fire; yet already there were younger stars ablaze on the tips of the tapers. Various persons in whom his interest had not been intense drew closer to him by entering this company. He went over it, head by head, till he felt like the shepherd of a huddled flock, with all a shepherd's vision of differences imperceptible. He knew his candles apart, up to the colour of the flame, and would still have known them had their positions all been changed. To other imaginations they might stand for other things - that they should stand for something to be hushed before was all he desired; but he was intensely conscious of the personal note of each and of the distinguishable way it contributed to the concert. There were hours at which he almost caught himself wishing that certain of his friends would now die, that he might establish with them in this manner a connexion more charming than, as it happened, it was possible to enjoy with them in life. In regard to those from whom one was separated by the long curves of the globe such a connexion could only be an improvement: it brought them instantly within reach. Of course there were gaps in the constellation, for Stransom knew he could only pretend to act for his own, and it wasn't every figure passing before his eyes into the great obscure that was entitled to a memorial. There was a strange sanctification in death, but some characters were more sanctified by being forgotten than by being remembered. The

greatest blank in the shining page was the memory of Acton Hague, of which he inveterately tried to rid himself. For Acton Hague no flame could ever rise on any altar of his.

CHAPTER IV.

Every year, the day he walked back from the great graveyard, he went to church as he had done the day his idea was born. It was on this occasion, as it happened, after a year had passed, that he began to observe his altar to be haunted by a worshipper at least as frequent as himself. Others of the faithful, and in the rest of the church, came and went, appealing sometimes, when they disappeared, to a vague or to a particular recognition; but this unfailing presence was always to be observed when he arrived and still in possession when he departed. He was surprised, the first time, at the promptitude with which it assumed an identity for him - the identity of the lady whom two years before, on his anniversary, he had seen so intensely bowed, and of whose tragic face he had had so flitting a vision. Given the time that had passed, his recollection of her was fresh enough to make him wonder. Of himself she had of course no impression, or rather had had none at first: the time came when her manner of transacting her business suggested her having gradually guessed his call to be of the same order. She used his altar for her own purpose - he could only hope that sad and solitary as she always struck him, she used it for her own Dead. There were interruptions, infidelities, all on his part, calls to other associations and duties; but as the months went on he found her whenever he returned, and he ended by taking pleasure in the thought that he had given her almost the contentment he had given himself. They worshipped side by side so often that there were moments when he wished he might be sure, so straight did their prospect stretch away of growing old together in their rites. She was younger than he, but she

looked as if her Dead were at least as numerous as his candles. She had no colour, no sound, no fault, and another of the things about which he had made up his mind was that she had no fortune. Always black-robed, she must have had a succession of sorrows. People weren't poor, after all, whom so many losses could overtake; they were positively rich when they had had so much to give up. But the air of this devoted and indifferent woman, who always made, in any attitude, a beautiful accidental line, conveyed somehow to Stransom that she had known more kinds of trouble than one.

He had a great love of music and little time for the joy of it; but occasionally, when workaday noises were muffled by Saturday afternoons, it used to come back to him that there were glories. There were moreover friends who reminded him of this and side by side with whom he found himself sitting out concerts. On one of these winter afternoons, in St. James's Hall, he became aware after he had seated himself that the lady he had so often seen at church was in the place next him and was evidently alone, as he also this time happened to be. She was at first too absorbed in the consideration of the programme to heed him, but when she at last glanced at him he took advantage of the movement to speak to her, greeting her with the remark that he felt as if he already knew her. She smiled as she said "Oh yes, I recognise you"; yet in spite of this admission of long acquaintance it was the first he had seen of her smile. The effect of it was suddenly to contribute more to that acquaintance than all the previous meetings had done. He hadn't "taken in," he said to himself, that she was so pretty. Later, that evening - it was while he rolled along in a hansom on his way to dine out - he added that he hadn't taken in that she was so interesting. The next morning in the midst of his work he quite suddenly and irrelevantly reflected that his impression of her, beginning so far back, was like a winding river that had at last reached the sea.

His work in fact was blurred a little all that day by the sense of what had now passed between them. It wasn't much, but it had just made the

difference. They had listened together to Beethoven and Schumann; they had talked in the pauses, and at the end, when at the door, to which they moved together, he had asked her if he could help her in the matter of getting away. She had thanked him and put up her umbrella, slipping into the crowd without an allusion to their meeting yet again and leaving him to remember at leisure that not a word had been exchanged about the usual scene of that coincidence. This omission struck him now as natural and then again as perverse. She mightn't in the least have allowed his warrant for speaking to her, and yet if she hadn't he would have judged her an underbred woman. It was odd that when nothing had really ever brought them together he should have been able successfully to assume they were in a manner old friends - that this negative quantity was somehow more than they could express. His success, it was true, had been qualified by her quick escape, so that there grew up in him an absurd desire to put it to some better test. Save in so far as some other poor chance might help him, such a test could be only to meet her afresh at church. Left to himself he would have gone to church the very next afternoon, just for the curiosity of seeing if he should find her there. But he wasn't left to himself, a fact he discovered quite at the last, after he had virtually made up his mind to go. The influence that kept him away really revealed to him how little to himself his Dead ever left him. He went only for them - for nothing else in the world.

The force of this revulsion kept him away ten days: he hated to connect the place with anything but his offices or to give a glimpse of the curiosity that had been on the point of moving him. It was absurd to weave a tangle about a matter so simple as a custom of devotion that might with ease have been daily or hourly; yet the tangle got itself woven. He was sorry, he was disappointed: it was as if a long happy spell had been broken and he had lost a familiar security. At the last, however, he asked himself if he was to stay away for ever from the fear of this muddle about motives. After an interval neither longer nor shorter than usual he re-entered the church with a clear conviction that he should scarcely heed the presence or the absence of the lady of the concert. This indifference didn't prevent his at

once noting that for the only time since he had first seen her she wasn't on the spot. He had now no scruple about giving her time to arrive, but she didn't arrive, and when he went away still missing her he was profanely and consentingly sorry. If her absence made the tangle more intricate, that was all her own doing. By the end of another year it was very intricate indeed; but by that time he didn't in the least care, and it was only his cultivated consciousness that had given him scruples. Three times in three months he had gone to church without finding her, and he felt he hadn't needed these occasions to show him his suspense had dropped. Yet it was, incongruously, not indifference, but a refinement of delicacy that had kept him from asking the sacristan, who would of course immediately have recognised his description of her, whether she had been seen at other hours. His delicacy had kept him from asking any question about her at any time, and it was exactly the same virtue that had left him so free to be decently civil to her at the concert.

This happy advantage now served him anew, enabling him when she finally met his eyes - it was after a fourth trial - to predetermine quite fixedly his awaiting her retreat. He joined her in the street as soon as she had moved, asking her if he might accompany her a certain distance. With her placid permission he went as far as a house in the neighbourhood at which she had business: she let him know it was not where she lived. She lived, as she said, in a mere slum, with an old aunt, a person in connexion with whom she spoke of the engrossment of humdrum duties and regular occupations. She wasn't, the mourning niece, in her first youth, and her vanished freshness had left something behind that, for Stransom, represented the proof it had been tragically sacrificed. Whatever she gave him the assurance of she gave without references. She might have been a divorced duchess - she might have been an old maid who taught the harp.

CHAPTER V.

They fell at last into the way of walking together almost every time they met, though for a long time still they never met but at church. He couldn't ask her to come and see him, and as if she hadn't a proper place to receive him she never invited her friend. As much as himself she knew the world of London, but from an undiscussed instinct of privacy they haunted the region not mapped on the social chart. On the return she always made him leave her at the same corner. She looked with him, as a pretext for a pause, at the depressed things in suburban shop-fronts; and there was never a word he had said to her that she hadn't beautifully understood. For long ages he never knew her name, any more than she had ever pronounced his own; but it was not their names that mattered, it was only their perfect practice and their common need.

These things made their whole relation so impersonal that they hadn't the rules or reasons people found in ordinary friendships. They didn't care for the things it was supposed necessary to care for in the intercourse of the world. They ended one day - they never knew which of them expressed it first - by throwing out the idea that they didn't care for each other. Over this idea they grew quite intimate; they rallied to it in a way that marked a fresh start in their confidence. If to feel deeply together about certain things wholly distinct from themselves didn't constitute a safety, where was safety to be looked for? Not lightly nor often, not without occasion nor without emotion, any more than in any other reference by serious people to a mystery of their faith; but when something had happened to warm, as it were, the air for it, they came as near as they could come to calling their Dead by name. They felt it was coming very near to utter their thought at all. The word "they" expressed enough; it limited the mention, it had a dignity of its own, and if, in their talk, you had heard our friends use it, you might have taken them for a pair of pagans of old alluding decently to the domesticated gods. They never knew - at least Stransom never knew - how they had learned to be sure about each other. If it had been with each a question of what the other was there for, the certitude had come in some

fine way of its own. Any faith, after all, has the instinct of propagation, and it was as natural as it was beautiful that they should have taken pleasure on the spot in the imagination of a following. If the following was for each but a following of one it had proved in the event sufficient. Her debt, however, of course was much greater than his, because while she had only given him a worshipper he had given her a splendid temple. Once she said she pitied him for the length of his list - she had counted his candles almost as often as himself - and this made him wonder what could have been the length of hers. He had wondered before at the coincidence of their losses, especially as from time to time a new candle was set up. On some occasion some accident led him to express this curiosity, and she answered as if in surprise that he hadn't already understood. "Oh for me, you know, the more there are the better - there could never be too many. I should like hundreds and hundreds - I should like thousands; I should like a great mountain of light."

Then of course in a flash he understood. "Your Dead are only One?"

She hung back at this as never yet. "Only One," she answered, colouring as if now he knew her guarded secret. It really made him feel he knew less than before, so difficult was it for him to reconstitute a life in which a single experience had so belittled all others. His own life, round its central hollow, had been packed close enough. After this she appeared to have regretted her confession, though at the moment she spoke there had been pride in her very embarrassment. She declared to him that his own was the larger, the dearer possession - the portion one would have chosen if one had been able to choose; she assured him she could perfectly imagine some of the echoes with which his silences were peopled. He knew she couldn't: one's relation to what one had loved and hated had been a relation too distinct from the relations of others. But this didn't affect the fact that they were growing old together in their piety. She was a feature of that piety, but even at the ripe stage of acquaintance in which they occasionally arranged to meet at a concert or to go together to an exhibition she was not a feature of anything else. The most that happened

was that his worship became paramount. Friend by friend dropped away till at last there were more emblems on his altar than houses left him to enter. She was more than any other the friend who remained, but she was unknown to all the rest. Once when she had discovered, as they called it, a new star, she used the expression that the chapel at last was full.

"Oh no," Stransom replied, "there is a great thing wanting for that! The chapel will never be full till a candle is set up before which all the others will pale. It will be the tallest candle of all."

Her mild wonder rested on him. "What candle do you mean?"

"I mean, dear lady, my own."

He had learned after a long time that she earned money by her pen, writing under a pseudonym she never disclosed in magazines he never saw. She knew too well what he couldn't read and what she couldn't write, and she taught him to cultivate indifference with a success that did much for their good relations. Her invisible industry was a convenience to him; it helped his contented thought of her, the thought that rested in the dignity of her proud obscure life, her little remunerated art and her little impenetrable home. Lost, with her decayed relative, in her dim suburban world, she came to the surface for him in distant places. She was really the priestess of his altar, and whenever he quitted England he committed it to her keeping. She proved to him afresh that women have more of the spirit of religion than men; he felt his fidelity pale and faint in comparison with hers. He often said to her that since he had so little time to live he rejoiced in her having so much; so glad was he to think she would guard the temple when he should have been called. He had a great plan for that, which of course he told her too, a bequest of money to keep it up in undiminished state. Of the administration of this fund he would appoint her superintendent, and if the spirit should move her she might kindle a taper even for him.

"And who will kindle one even for me?" she then seriously asked.

CHAPTER VI.

She was always in mourning, yet the day he came back from the longest absence he had yet made her appearance immediately told him she had lately had a bereavement. They met on this occasion as she was leaving the church, so that postponing his own entrance he instantly offered to turn round and walk away with her. She considered, then she said: “Go in now, but come and see me in an hour.” He knew the small vista of her street, closed at the end and as dreary as an empty pocket, where the pairs of shabby little houses, semi-detached but indissolubly united, were like married couples on bad terms. Often, however, as he had gone to the beginning he had never gone beyond. Her aunt was dead - that he immediately guessed, as well as that it made a difference; but when she had for the first time mentioned her number he found himself, on her leaving him, not a little agitated by this sudden liberality. She wasn’t a person with whom, after all, one got on so very fast: it had taken him months and months to learn her name, years and years to learn her address. If she had looked, on this reunion, so much older to him, how in the world did he look to her? She had reached the period of life he had long since reached, when, after separations, the marked clock-face of the friend we meet announces the hour we have tried to forget. He couldn’t have said what he expected as, at the end of his waiting, he turned the corner where for years he had always paused; simply not to pause was a efficient cause for emotion. It was an event, somehow; and in all their long acquaintance there had never been an event. This one grew larger when, five minutes later, in the faint elegance of her little drawing-room, she quavered out a greeting that showed the measure she took of it. He had a strange sense of having come for something in particular; strange because literally there was nothing particular between them, nothing save that they

were at one on their great point, which had long ago become a magnificent matter of course. It was true that after she had said "You can always come now, you know," the thing he was there for seemed already to have happened. He asked her if it was the death of her aunt that made the difference; to which she replied: "She never knew I knew you. I wished her not to." The beautiful clearness of her candour - her faded beauty was like a summer twilight - disconnected the words from any image of deceit. They might have struck him as the record of a deep dissimulation; but she had always given him a sense of noble reasons. The vanished aunt was present, as he looked about him, in the small complacencies of the room, the beaded velvet and the fluted moreen; and though, as we know, he had the worship of the Dead, he found himself not definitely regretting this lady. If she wasn't in his long list, however, she was in her niece's short one, and Stransom presently observed to the latter that now at least, in the place they haunted together, she would have another object of devotion.

"Yes, I shall have another. She was very kind to me. It's that that's the difference."

He judged, wondering a good deal before he made any motion to leave her, that the difference would somehow be very great and would consist of still other things than her having let him come in. It rather chilled him, for they had been happy together as they were. He extracted from her at any rate an intimation that she should now have means less limited, that her aunt's tiny fortune had come to her, so that there was henceforth only one to consume what had formerly been made to suffice for two. This was a joy to Stransom, because it had hitherto been equally impossible for him either to offer her presents or contentedly to stay his hand. It was too ugly to be at her side that way, abounding himself and yet not able to overflow - a demonstration that would have been signally a false note. Even her better situation too seemed only to draw out in a sense the loneliness of her future. It would merely help her to live more and more for their small ceremonial, and this at a time when he himself had begun wearily to feel that, having set it in motion, he might depart. When they had sat a while in

the pale parlour she got up - “This isn’t my room: let us go into mine.” They had only to cross the narrow hall, as he found, to pass quite into another air. When she had closed the door of the second room, as she called it, he felt at last in real possession of her. The place had the flush of life - it was expressive; its dark red walls were articulate with memories and relics. These were simple things - photographs and water-colours, scraps of writing framed and ghosts of flowers embalmed; but a moment sufficed to show him they had a common meaning. It was here she had lived and worked, and she had already told him she would make no change of scene. He read the reference in the objects about her - the general one to places and times; but after a minute he distinguished among them a small portrait of a gentleman. At a distance and without their glasses his eyes were only so caught by it as to feel a vague curiosity. Presently this impulse carried him nearer, and in another moment he was staring at the picture in stupefaction and with the sense that some sound had broken from him. He was further conscious that he showed his companion a white face when he turned round on her gasping: “Acton Hague!”

She matched his great wonder. “Did you know him?”

“He was the friend of all my youth - of my early manhood. And you knew him?”

She coloured at this and for a moment her answer failed; her eyes embraced everything in the place, and a strange irony reached her lips as she echoed: “Knew him?”

Then Stransom understood, while the room heaved like the cabin of a ship, that its whole contents cried out with him, that it was a museum in his honour, that all her later years had been addressed to him and that the shrine he himself had reared had been passionately converted to this use. It was all for Acton Hague that she had kneeled every day at his altar. What need had there been for a consecrated candle when he was present

in the whole array? The revelation so smote our friend in the face that he dropped into a seat and sat silent. He had quickly felt her shaken by the force of his shock, but as she sank on the sofa beside him and laid her hand on his arm he knew almost as soon that she mightn't resent it as much as she'd have liked.

CHAPTER VII.

He learned in that instant two things: one being that even in so long a time she had gathered no knowledge of his great intimacy and his great quarrel; the other that in spite of this ignorance, strangely enough, she supplied on the spot a reason for his stupor. "How extraordinary," he presently exclaimed, "that we should never have known!"

She gave a wan smile which seemed to Stransom stranger even than the fact itself. "I never, never spoke of him."

He looked again about the room. "Why then, if your life had been so full of him?"

"Mayn't I put you that question as well? Hadn't your life also been full of him?"

"Any one's, every one's life who had the wonderful experience of knowing him. I never spoke of him," Stransom added in a moment, "because he did me - years ago - an unforgettable wrong." She was silent, and with the full effect of his presence all about them it almost startled her guest to hear no protest escape her. She accepted his words, he turned his eyes to her again to see in what manner she accepted them. It was with rising tears and a rare sweetness in the movement of putting out her hand to take his

own. Nothing more wonderful had ever appeared to him than, in that little chamber of remembrance and homage, to see her convey with such exquisite mildness that as from Acton Hague any injury was credible. The clock ticked in the stillness - Hague had probably given it to her - and while he let her hold his hand with a tenderness that was almost an assumption of responsibility for his old pain as well as his new, Stransom after a minute broke out: “Good God, how he must have used you!”

She dropped his hand at this, got up and, moving across the room, made straight a small picture to which, on examining it, he had given a slight push. Then turning round on him with her pale gaiety recovered, “I’ve forgiven him!” she declared.

“I know what you’ve done,” said Stransom “I know what you’ve done for years.” For a moment they looked at each other through it all with their long community of service in their eyes. This short passage made, to his sense, for the woman before him, an immense, an absolutely naked confession; which was presently, suddenly blushing red and changing her place again, what she appeared to learn he perceived in it. He got up and “How you must have loved him!” he cried.

“Women aren’t like men. They can love even where they’ve suffered.”

“Women are wonderful,” said Stransom. “But I assure you I’ve forgiven him too.”

“If I had known of anything so strange I wouldn’t have brought you here.”

“So that we might have gone on in our ignorance to the last?”

“What do you call the last?” she asked, smiling still.

At this he could smile back at her. “You’ll see - when it comes.”

She thought of that. “This is better perhaps; but as we were - it was good.”

He put her the question. “Did it never happen that he spoke of me?”

Considering more intently she made no answer, and he then knew he should have been adequately answered by her asking how often he himself had spoken of their terrible friend. Suddenly a brighter light broke in her face and an excited idea sprang to her lips in the appeal: “You have forgiven him?”

“How, if I hadn’t, could I linger here?”

She visibly winced at the deep but unintended irony of this; but even while she did so she panted quickly: “Then in the lights on your altar - ?”

“There’s never a light for Acton Hague!”

She stared with a dreadful fall, “But if he’s one of your Dead?”

“He’s one of the world’s, if you like - he’s one of yours. But he’s not one of mine. Mine are only the Dead who died possessed of me. They’re mine in death because they were mine in life.”

“He was yours in life then, even if for a while he ceased to be. If you forgave him you went back to him. Those whom we’ve once loved - ”

“Are those who can hurt us most,” Stransom broke in.

“Ah it’s not true - you’ve not forgiven him!” she wailed with a passion that startled him.

He looked at her as never yet. “What was it he did to you?”

“Everything!” Then abruptly she put out her hand in farewell. “Good-bye.”

He turned as cold as he had turned that night he read the man's death. "You mean that we meet no more?"

"Not as we've met - not there!"

He stood aghast at this snap of their great bond, at the renouncement that rang out in the word she so expressively sounded. "But what's changed - for you?"

She waited in all the sharpness of a trouble that for the first time since he had known her made her splendidly stern. "How can you understand now when you didn't understand before?"

"I didn't understand before only because I didn't know. Now that I know, I see what I've been living with for years," Stransom went on very gently.

She looked at him with a larger allowance, doing this gentleness justice. "How can I then, on this new knowledge of my own, ask you to continue to live with it?"

"I set up my altar, with its multiplied meanings," Stransom began; but she quietly interrupted him.

"You set up your altar, and when I wanted one most I found it magnificently ready. I used it with the gratitude I've always shown you, for I knew it from of old to be dedicated to Death. I told you long ago that my Dead weren't many. Yours were, but all you had done for them was none too much for my worship! You had placed a great light for Each - I gathered them together for One!"

"We had simply different intentions," he returned. "That, as you say, I perfectly knew, and I don't see why your intention shouldn't still sustain you."

“That’s because you’re generous - you can imagine and think. But the spell is broken.”

It seemed to poor Stransom, in spite of his resistance, that it really was, and the prospect stretched grey and void before him. All he could say, however, was: “I hope you’ll try before you give up.”

“If I had known you had ever known him I should have taken for granted he had his candle,” she presently answered. “What’s changed, as you say, is that on making the discovery I find he never has had it. That makes my attitude” - she paused as thinking how to express it, then said simply - “all wrong.”

“Come once again,” he pleaded.

“Will you give him his candle?” she asked.

He waited, but only because it would sound ungracious; not because of a doubt of his feeling. “I can’t do that!” he declared at last.

“Then good-bye.” And she gave him her hand again.

He had got his dismissal; besides which, in the agitation of everything that had opened out to him, he felt the need to recover himself as he could only do in solitude. Yet he lingered - lingered to see if she had no compromise to express, no attenuation to propose. But he only met her great lamenting eyes, in which indeed he read that she was as sorry for him as for any one else. This made him say: “At least, in any case, I may see you here.”

“Oh yes, come if you like. But I don’t think it will do.”

He looked round the room once more, knowing how little he was sure it would do. He felt also stricken and more and more cold, and his chill was

like an ague in which he had to make an effort not to shake. Then he made doleful reply: “I must try on my side - if you can’t try on yours.” She came out with him to the hall and into the doorway, and here he put her the question he held he could least answer from his own wit. “Why have you never let me come before?”

“Because my aunt would have seen you, and I should have had to tell her how I came to know you.”

“And what would have been the objection to that?”

“It would have entailed other explanations; there would at any rate have been that danger.”

“Surely she knew you went every day to church,” Stransom objected.

“She didn’t know what I went for.”

“Of me then she never even heard?”

“You’ll think I was deceitful. But I didn’t need to be!”

He was now on the lower door-step, and his hostess held the door half-closed behind him. Through what remained of the opening he saw her framed face. He made a supreme appeal. “What did he do to you?”

“It would have come out - she would have told you. That fear at my heart - that was my reason!” And she closed the door, shutting him out.

CHAPTER VIII.

He had ruthlessly abandoned her - that of course was what he had done. Stransom made it all out in solitude, at leisure, fitting the unmatched pieces gradually together and dealing one by one with a hundred obscure points. She had known Hague only after her present friend's relations with him had wholly terminated; obviously indeed a good while after; and it was natural enough that of his previous life she should have ascertained only what he had judged good to communicate. There were passages it was quite conceivable that even in moments of the tenderest expansion he should have withheld. Of many facts in the career of a man so in the eye of the world there was of course a common knowledge; but this lady lived apart from public affairs, and the only time perfectly clear to her would have been the time following the dawn of her own drama. A man in her place would have "looked up" the past - would even have consulted old newspapers. It remained remarkable indeed that in her long contact with the partner of her retrospect no accident had lighted a train; but there was no arguing about that; the accident had in fact come: it had simply been that security had prevailed. She had taken what Hague had given her, and her blankness in respect of his other connexions was only a touch in the picture of that plasticity Stransom had supreme reason to know so great a master could have been trusted to produce.

This picture was for a while all our friend saw: he caught his breath again and again as it came over him that the woman with whom he had had for years so fine a point of contact was a woman whom Acton Hague, of all men in the world, had more or less fashioned. Such as she sat there to-day she was ineffaceably stamped with him. Beneficent, blameless as Stransom held her, he couldn't rid himself of the sense that he had been, as who should say, swindled. She had imposed upon him hugely, though she had known it as little as he. All this later past came back to him as a time grotesquely misspent. Such at least were his first reflexions; after a while he found himself more divided and only, as the end of it, more troubled. He imagined, recalled, reconstituted, figured out for himself the truth she had refused to give him; the effect of which was to make her

seem to him only more saturated with her fate. He felt her spirit, through the whole strangeness, finer than his own to the very degree in which she might have been, in which she certainly had been, more wronged. A women, when wronged, was always more wronged than a man, and there were conditions when the least she could have got off with was more than the most he could have to bear. He was sure this rare creature wouldn't have got off with the least. He was awestruck at the thought of such a surrender - such a prostration. Moulded indeed she had been by powerful hands, to have converted her injury into an exaltation so sublime. The fellow had only had to die for everything that was ugly in him to be washed out in a torrent. It was vain to try to guess what had taken place, but nothing could be clearer than that she had ended by accusing herself. She absolved him at every point, she adored her very wounds. The passion by which he had profited had rushed back after its ebb, and now the tide of tenderness, arrested for ever at flood, was too deep even to fathom. Stransom sincerely considered that he had forgiven him; but how little he had achieved the miracle that she had achieved! His forgiveness was silence, but hers was mere unuttered sound. The light she had demanded for his altar would have broken his silence with a blare; whereas all the lights in the church were for her too great a hush.

She had been right about the difference - she had spoken the truth about the change: Stransom was soon to know himself as perversely but sharply jealous. His tide had ebbed, not flowed; if he had "forgiven" Acton Hague, that forgiveness was a motive with a broken spring. The very fact of her appeal for a material sign, a sign that should make her dead lover equal there with the others, presented the concession to her friend as too handsome for the case. He had never thought of himself as hard, but an exorbitant article might easily render him so. He moved round and round this one, but only in widening circles - the more he looked at it the less acceptable it seemed. At the same time he had no illusion about the effect of his refusal; he perfectly saw how it would make for a rupture. He left her alone a week, but when at last he again called this conviction was cruelly confirmed. In the interval he had kept away from the church, and he

needed no fresh assurance from her to know she hadn't entered it. The change was complete enough: it had broken up her life. Indeed it had broken up his, for all the fires of his shrine seemed to him suddenly to have been quenched. A great indifference fell upon him, the weight of which was in itself a pain; and he never knew what his devotion had been for him till in that shock it ceased like a dropped watch. Neither did he know with how large a confidence he had counted on the final service that had now failed: the mortal deception was that in this abandonment the whole future gave way.

These days of her absence proved to him of what she was capable; all the more that he never dreamed she was vindictive or even resentful. It was not in anger she had forsaken him; it was in simple submission to hard reality, to the stern logic of life. This came home to him when he sat with her again in the room in which her late aunt's conversation lingered like the tone of a cracked piano. She tried to make him forget how much they were estranged, but in the very presence of what they had given up it was impossible not to be sorry for her. He had taken from her so much more than she had taken from him. He argued with her again, told her she could now have the altar to herself; but she only shook her head with pleading sadness, begging him not to waste his breath on the impossible, the extinct. Couldn't he see that in relation to her private need the rites he had established were practically an elaborate exclusion? She regretted nothing that had happened; it had all been right so long as she didn't know, and it was only that now she knew too much and that from the moment their eyes were open they would simply have to conform. It had doubtless been happiness enough for them to go on together so long. She was gentle, grateful, resigned; but this was only the form of a deep immoveability. He saw he should never more cross the threshold of the second room, and he felt how much this alone would make a stranger of him and give a conscious stiffness to his visits. He would have hated to plunge again into that well of reminders, but he enjoyed quite as little the vacant alternative.

After he had been with her three or four times it struck him that to have come at last into her house had had the horrid effect of diminishing their intimacy. He had known her better, had liked her in greater freedom, when they merely walked together or kneeled together. Now they only pretended; before they had been nobly sincere. They began to try their walks again, but it proved a lame imitation, for these things, from the first, beginning or ending, had been connected with their visits to the church. They had either strolled away as they came out or gone in to rest on the return. Stransom, besides, now faltered; he couldn't walk as of old. The omission made everything false; it was a dire mutilation of their lives. Our friend was frank and monotonous, making no mystery of his remonstrance and no secret of his predicament. Her response, whatever it was, always came to the same thing - an implied invitation to him to judge, if he spoke of predicaments, of how much comfort she had in hers. For him indeed was no comfort even in complaint, since every allusion to what had befallen them but made the author of their trouble more present. Acton Hague was between them - that was the essence of the matter, and never so much between them as when they were face to face. Then Stransom, while still wanting to banish him, had the strangest sense of striving for an ease that would involve having accepted him. Deeply disconcerted by what he knew, he was still worse tormented by really not knowing. Perfectly aware that it would have been horribly vulgar to abuse his old friend or to tell his companion the story of their quarrel, it yet vexed him that her depth of reserve should give him no opening and should have the effect of a magnanimity greater even than his own.

He challenged himself, denounced himself, asked himself if he were in love with her that he should care so much what adventures she had had. He had never for a moment allowed he was in love with her; therefore nothing could have surprised him more than to discover he was jealous. What but jealousy could give a man that sore contentious wish for the detail of what would make him suffer? Well enough he knew indeed that he should never have it from the only person who to-day could give it to him. She let him press her with his sombre eyes, only smiling at him with

an exquisite mercy and breathing equally little the word that would expose her secret and the word that would appear to deny his literal right to bitterness. She told nothing, she judged nothing; she accepted everything but the possibility of her return to the old symbols. Stransom divined that for her too they had been vividly individual, had stood for particular hours or particular attributes - particular links in her chain. He made it clear to himself, as he believed, that his difficulty lay in the fact that the very nature of the plea for his faithless friend constituted a prohibition; that it happened to have come from her was precisely the vice that attached to it. To the voice of impersonal generosity he felt sure he would have listened; he would have deferred to an advocate who, speaking from abstract justice, knowing of his denial without having known Hague, should have had the imagination to say: “Ah, remember only the best of him; pity him; provide for him.” To provide for him on the very ground of having discovered another of his turpitudes was not to pity but to glorify him. The more Stransom thought the more he made out that whatever this relation of Hague’s it could only have been a deception more or less finely practised. Where had it come into the life that all men saw? Why had one never heard of it if it had had the frankness of honourable things? Stransom knew enough of his other ties, of his obligations and appearances, not to say enough of his general character, to be sure there had been some infamy. In one way or another this creature had been coldly sacrificed. That was why at the last as well as the first he must still leave him out and out.

CHAPTER IX.

And yet this was no solution, especially after he had talked again to his friend of all it had been his plan she should finally do for him. He had talked in the other days, and she had responded with a frankness qualified

only by a courteous reluctance, a reluctance that touched him, to linger on the question of his death. She had then practically accepted the charge, suffered him to feel he could depend upon her to be the eventual guardian of his shrine; and it was in the name of what had so passed between them that he appealed to her not to forsake him in his age. She listened at present with shining coldness and all her habitual forbearance to insist on her terms; her deprecation was even still tenderer, for it expressed the compassion of her own sense that he was abandoned. Her terms, however, remained the same, and scarcely the less audible for not being uttered; though he was sure that secretly even more than he she felt bereft of the satisfaction his solemn trust was to have provided her. They both missed the rich future, but she missed it most, because after all it was to have been entirely hers; and it was her acceptance of the loss that gave him the full measure of her preference for the thought of Acton Hague over any other thought whatever. He had humour enough to laugh rather grimly when he said to himself: “Why the deuce does she like him so much more than she likes me?” - the reasons being really so conceivable. But even his faculty of analysis left the irritation standing, and this irritation proved perhaps the greatest misfortune that had ever overtaken him. There had been nothing yet that made him so much want to give up. He had of course by this time well reached the age of renouncement; but it had not hitherto been vivid to him that it was time to give up everything.

Practically, at the end of six months, he had renounced the friendship once so charming and comforting. His privation had two faces, and the face it had turned to him on the occasion of his last attempt to cultivate that friendship was the one he could look at least. This was the privation he inflicted; the other was the privation he bore. The conditions she never phrased he used to murmur to himself in solitude: “One more, one more - only just one.” Certainly he was going down; he often felt it when he caught himself, over his work, staring at vacancy and giving voice to that inanity. There was proof enough besides in his being so weak and so ill. His irritation took the form of melancholy, and his melancholy that of the conviction that his health had quite failed. His altar moreover had ceased

to exist; his chapel, in his dreams, was a great dark cavern. All the lights had gone out - all his Dead had died again. He couldn't exactly see at first how it had been in the power of his late companion to extinguish them, since it was neither for her nor by her that they had been called into being. Then he understood that it was essentially in his own soul the revival had taken place, and that in the air of this soul they were now unable to breathe. The candles might mechanically burn, but each of them had lost its lustre. The church had become a void; it was his presence, her presence, their common presence, that had made the indispensable medium. If anything was wrong everything was - her silence spoiled the tune.

Then when three months were gone he felt so lonely that he went back; reflecting that as they had been his best society for years his Dead perhaps wouldn't let him forsake them without doing something more for him. They stood there, as he had left them, in their tall radiance, the bright cluster that had already made him, on occasions when he was willing to compare small things with great, liken them to a group of sea-lights on the edge of the ocean of life. It was a relief to him, after a while, as he sat there, to feel they had still a virtue. He was more and more easily tired, and he always drove now; the action of his heart was weak and gave him none of the reassurance conferred by the action of his fancy. None the less he returned yet again, returned several times, and finally, during six months, haunted the place with a renewal of frequency and a strain of impatience. In winter the church was unwarmed and exposure to cold forbidden him, but the glow of his shrine was an influence in which he could almost bask. He sat and wondered to what he had reduced his absent associate and what she now did with the hours of her absence. There were other churches, there were other altars, there were other candles; in one way or another her piety would still operate; he couldn't absolutely have deprived her of her rites. So he argued, but without contentment; for he well enough knew there was no other such rare semblance of the mountain of light she had once mentioned to him as the satisfaction of her need. As this semblance again gradually grew great to

him and his pious practice more regular, he found a sharper and sharper pang in the imagination of her darkness; for never so much as in these weeks had his rites been real, never had his gathered company seemed so to respond and even to invite. He lost himself in the large lustre, which was more and more what he had from the first wished it to be - as dazzling as the vision of heaven in the mind of a child. He wandered in the fields of light; he passed, among the tall tapers, from tier to tier, from fire to fire, from name to name, from the white intensity of one clear emblem, of one saved soul, to another. It was in the quiet sense of having saved his souls that his deep strange instinct rejoiced. This was no dim theological rescue, no boon of a contingent world; they were saved better than faith or works could save them, saved for the warm world they had shrunk from dying to, for actuality, for continuity, for the certainty of human remembrance.

By this time he had survived all his friends; the last straight flame was three years old, there was no one to add to the list. Over and over he called his roll, and it appeared to him compact and complete. Where should he put in another, where, if there were no other objection, would it stand in its place in the rank? He reflected, with a want of sincerity of which he was quite conscious, that it would be difficult to determine that place. More and more, besides, face to face with his little legion, over endless histories, handling the empty shells and playing with the silence - more and more he could see that he had never introduced an alien. He had had his great companions, his indulgences - there were cases in which they had been immense; but what had his devotion after all been if it hadn't been at bottom a respect? He was, however, himself surprised at his stiffness; by the end of the winter the responsibility of it was what was uppermost in his thoughts. The refrain had grown old to them, that plea for just one more. There came a day when, for simple exhaustion, if symmetry should demand just one he was ready so far to meet symmetry. Symmetry was harmony, and the idea of harmony began to haunt him; he said to himself that harmony was of course everything. He took, in fancy, his composition to pieces, redistributing it into other lines, making other juxtapositions and contrasts. He shifted this and that candle, he made the

spaces different, he effaced the disfigurement of a possible gap. There were subtle and complex relations, a scheme of cross-reference, and moments in which he seemed to catch a glimpse of the void so sensible to the woman who wandered in exile or sat where he had seen her with the portrait of Acton Hague. Finally, in this way, he arrived at a conception of the total, the ideal, which left a clear opportunity for just another figure. "Just one more - to round it off; just one more, just one," continued to hum in his head. There was a strange confusion in the thought, for he felt the day to be near when he too should be one of the Others. What in this event would the Others matter to him, since they only mattered to the living? Even as one of the Dead what would his altar matter to him, since his particular dream of keeping it up had melted away? What had harmony to do with the case if his lights were all to be quenched? What he had hoped for was an instituted thing. He might perpetuate it on some other pretext, but his special meaning would have dropped. This meaning was to have lasted with the life of the one other person who understood it.

In March he had an illness during which he spent a fortnight in bed, and when he revived a little he was told of two things that had happened. One was that a lady whose name was not known to the servants (she left none) had been three times to ask about him; the other was that in his sleep and on an occasion when his mind evidently wandered he was heard to murmur again and again: "Just one more - just one." As soon as he found himself able to go out, and before the doctor in attendance had pronounced him so, he drove to see the lady who had come to ask about him. She was not at home; but this gave him the opportunity, before his strength should fall again, to take his way to the church. He entered it alone; he had declined, in a happy manner he possessed of being able to decline effectively, the company of his servant or of a nurse. He knew now perfectly what these good people thought; they had discovered his clandestine connexion, the magnet that had drawn him for so many years, and doubtless attached a significance of their own to the odd words they had repeated to him. The nameless lady was the clandestine connexion - a fact nothing could have made clearer than his indecent haste to rejoin

her. He sank on his knees before his altar while his head fell over on his hands. His weakness, his life's weariness overtook him. It seemed to him he had come for the great surrender. At first he asked himself how he should get away; then, with the failing belief in the power, the very desire to move gradually left him. He had come, as he always came, to lose himself; the fields of light were still there to stray in; only this time, in straying, he would never come back. He had given himself to his Dead, and it was good: this time his Dead would keep him. He couldn't rise from his knees; he believed he should never rise again; all he could do was to lift his face and fix his eyes on his lights. They looked unusually, strangely splendid, but the one that always drew him most had an unprecedented lustre. It was the central voice of the choir, the glowing heart of the brightness, and on this occasion it seemed to expand, to spread great wings of flame. The whole altar flared - dazzling and blinding; but the source of the vast radiance burned clearer than the rest, gathering itself into form, and the form was human beauty and human charity, was the far-off face of Mary Antrim. She smiled at him from the glory of heaven - she brought the glory down with her to take him. He bowed his head in submission and at the same moment another wave rolled over him. Was it the quickening of joy to pain? In the midst of his joy at any rate he felt his buried face grow hot as with some communicated knowledge that had the force of a reproach. It suddenly made him contrast that very rapture with the bliss he had refused to another. This breath of the passion immortal was all that other had asked; the descent of Mary Antrim opened his spirit with a great compunctious throb for the descent of Acton Hague. It was as if Stransom had read what her eyes said to him.

After a moment he looked round in a despair that made him feel as if the source of life were ebbing. The church had been empty - he was alone; but he wanted to have something done, to make a last appeal. This idea gave him strength for an effort; he rose to his feet with a movement that made him turn, supporting himself by the back of a bench. Behind him was a prostrate figure, a figure he had seen before; a woman in deep mourning, bowed in grief or in prayer. He had seen her in other days - the

first time of his entrance there, and he now slightly wavered, looking at her again till she seemed aware he had noticed her. She raised her head and met his eyes: the partner of his long worship had come back. She looked across at him an instant with a face wondering and scared; he saw he had made her afraid. Then quickly rising she came straight to him with both hands out.

“Then you could come? God sent you!” he murmured with a happy smile.

“You’re very ill - you shouldn’t be here,” she urged in anxious reply.

“God sent me too, I think. I was ill when I came, but the sight of you does wonders.” He held her hands, which steadied and quickened him. “I’ve something to tell you.”

“Don’t tell me!” she tenderly pleaded; “let me tell you. This afternoon, by a miracle, the sweetest of miracles, the sense of our difference left me. I was out - I was near, thinking, wandering alone, when, on the spot, something changed in my heart. It’s my confession - there it is. To come back, to come back on the instant - the idea gave me wings. It was as if I suddenly saw something - as if it all became possible. I could come for what you yourself came for: that was enough. So here I am. It’s not for my own - that’s over. But I’m here for them.” And breathless, infinitely relieved by her low precipitate explanation, she looked with eyes that reflected all its splendour at the magnificence of their altar.

“They’re here for you,” Stransom said, “they’re present to-night as they’ve never been. They speak for you - don’t you see? - in a passion of light; they sing out like a choir of angels. Don’t you hear what they say? - they offer the very thing you asked of me.”

“Don’t talk of it - don’t think of it; forget it!” She spoke in hushed supplication, and while the alarm deepened in her eyes she disengaged one of her hands and passed an arm round him to support him better, to

help him to sink into a seat.

He let himself go, resting on her; he dropped upon the bench and she fell on her knees beside him, his own arm round her shoulder. So he remained an instant, staring up at his shrine. “They say there’s a gap in the array - they say it’s not full, complete. Just one more,” he went on, softly - “isn’t that what you wanted? Yes, one more, one more.”

“Ah no more - no more!” she wailed, as with a quick new horror of it, under her breath.

“Yes, one more,” he repeated, simply; “just one!” And with this his head dropped on her shoulder; she felt that in his weakness he had fainted. But alone with him in the dusky church a great dread was on her of what might still happen, for his face had the whiteness of death.

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Nipper Nasmyth had been head of our school when Raffles was captain of cricket. I believe he owed his nickname entirely to the popular prejudice against a day-boy; and in view of the special reproach which the term carried in my time, as also of the fact that his father was one of the school trustees, partner in a banking firm of four resounding surnames, and manager of the local branch, there can be little doubt that the stigma was undeserved. But we did not think so then, for Nasmyth was unpopular with high and low, and appeared to glory in the fact. A swollen conscience caused him to see and hear even more than was warranted by his position, and his uncompromising nature compelled him to act on whatsoever he heard or saw: a savage custodian of public morals, he had in addition a perverse enthusiasm for lost causes, loved a minority for its own sake, and untenable tenets for theirs. Such, at all events, was my impression of Nipper Nasmyth, after my first term, which was also his last I had never spoken to him, but I had heard him speak with extraordinary force and fervor in the school debates. I carried a clear picture of his unkempt hair, his unbrushed coat, his dominant spectacles, his dogmatic jaw. And it was I who knew the combination at a glance, after years and years, when the fateful whim seized Raffles to play once more in the Old Boys' Match, and his will took me down with him to participate in the milder festivities of Founder's Day.

It was, however, no ordinary occasion. The bicentenary loomed but a year ahead, and a movement was on foot to mark the epoch with an adequate statue of our pious founder. A special meeting was to be held at the school-house, and Raffles had been specially invited by the new head master, a man of his own standing, who had been in the eleven with him up at Cambridge. Raffles had not been near the old place for

years; but I had never gone down since the day I left; and I will not dwell on the emotions which the once familiar journey awakened in my unworthy bosom. Paddington was alive with Old Boys of all ages--but very few of ours--if not as lively as we used to make it when we all landed back for the holidays. More of us had moustaches and cigarettes and "loud" ties. That was all. Yet of the throng, though two or three looked twice and thrice at Raffles, neither he nor I knew a soul until we had to change at the junction near our journey's end, when, as I say, it was I who recognized Nipper Nasmyth at sight.

The man was own son of the boy we both remembered. He had grown a ragged beard and a moustache that hung about his face like a neglected creeper. He was stout and bent and older than his years. But he spurned the platform with a stamping stride which even I remembered in an instant, and which was enough for Raffles before he saw the man's face.

"The Nipper it is!" he cried. "I could swear to that walk in a pantomime procession! See the independence in every step: that's his heel on the neck of the oppressor: it's the nonconformist conscience in baggy breeches. I must speak to him, Bunny. There was a lot of good in the old Nipper, though he and I did bar each other."

And in a moment he had accosted the man by the boy's nickname, obviously without thinking of an affront which few would have read in that hearty open face and hand.

"My name's Nasmyth," snapped the other, standing upright to glare.

"Forgive me," said Raffles undeterred. "One remembers a nickname and forgets all it never used to mean. Shake hands, my dear fellow! I'm Raffles. It must be fifteen years since we met."

"At least," replied Nasmyth coldly; but he could no longer refuse

Raffles his hand. "So you are going down," he sneered, "to this great gathering?" And I stood listening at my distance, as though still in the middle fourth.

"Rather!" cried Raffles. "I'm afraid I have let myself lose touch, but I mean to turn over a new leaf. I suppose that isn't necessary in your case, Nasmyth?"

He spoke with an enthusiasm rare indeed in him: it had grown upon Raffles in the train; the spirit of his boyhood had come rushing back at fifty miles an hour. He might have been following some honorable calling in town; he might have snatched this brief respite from a distinguished but exacting career. I am convinced that it was I alone who remembered at that moment the life we were really leading at that time. With me there walked this skeleton through every waking hour that was to follow. I shall endeavor not to refer to it again. Yet it should not be forgotten that my skeleton was always there.

"It certainly is not necessary in my case," replied Nasmyth, still as stiff as any poker. "I happen to be a trustee."

"Of the school?"

"Like my father before me."

"I congratulate you, my dear fellow!" cried the hearty Raffles--a younger Raffles than I had ever known in town.

"I don't know that you need," said Nasmyth sourly.

"But it must be a tremendous interest. And the proof is that you're going down to this show, like all the rest of us."

"No, I'm not. I live there, you see."

And I think the Nipper recalled that name as he ground his heel upon an unresponsive flagstone.

"But you're going to this meeting at the school-house, surely?"

"I don't know. If I do there may be squalls. I don't know what you think about this precious scheme Raffles, but I..."

The ragged beard stuck out, set teeth showed through the wild moustache, and in a sudden outpouring we had his views. They were narrow and intemperate and perverse as any I had heard him advocate as the firebrand of the Debating Society in my first term. But they were stated with all the old vim and venom. The mind of Nasmyth had not broadened with the years, but neither had its natural force abated, nor that of his character either. He spoke with great vigor at the top of his voice; soon we had a little crowd about us; but the tall collars and the broad smiles of the younger Old Boys did not deter our dowdy demagogue. Why spend money on a man who had been dead two hundred
years? What good could it do him or the school? Besides, he was only technically our founder. He had not founded a great public school. He had founded a little country grammar school which had pottered along for a century and a half. The great public school was the growth of the last fifty years, and no credit to the pillar of piety. Besides, he was only nominally pious. Nasmyth had made researches, and he knew. And why throw good money after a bad man?

"Are there many of your opinion?" inquired Raffles, when the agitator paused for breath. And Nasmyth beamed on us with flashing eyes.

"Not one to my knowledge as yet," said he. "But we shall see after to-morrow night. I hear it's to be quite an exceptional gathering this year; let us hope it may contain a few sane men. There are none on the

present staff, and I only know of one among the trustees!"

Raffles refrained from smiling as his dancing eye met mine.

"I can understand your view," he said. "I am not sure that I don't share it to some extent. But it seems to me a duty to support a general movement like this even if it doesn't take the direction or the shape of our own dreams. I suppose you yourself will give something, Nasmyth?"

"Give something? I? Not a brass farthing!" cried the implacable banker. "To do so would be to stultify my whole position. I cordially and conscientiously disapprove of the whole thing, and shall use all my influence against it. No, my good sir, I not only don't subscribe myself, but I hope to be the means of nipping a good many subscriptions in the bud."

I was probably the only one who saw the sudden and yet subtle change in Raffles--the hard mouth, the harder eye. I, at least, might have foreseen the sequel then and there. But his quiet voice betrayed nothing, as he inquired whether Nasmyth was going to speak at next night's meeting. Nasmyth said he might, and certainly warned us what to expect. He was still fulminating when our train came in.

"Then we meet again at Philippi," cried Raffles in gay adieu. "For you have been very frank with us all, Nasmyth, and I'll be frank enough in my turn to tell you that I've every intention of speaking on the other side!"

It happened that Raffles had been asked to speak by his old college friend, the new head master. Yet it was not at the school-house that he and I were to stay, but at the house that we had both been in as boys. It also had changed hands: a wing had been added, and the double tier of tiny studies made brilliant with electric light. But the quad

and the fives-courts did not look a day older; the ivy was no thicker round the study windows; and in one boy's castle we found the traditional print of Charing Cross Bridge which had knocked about our studies ever since a son of the contractor first sold it when he left. Nay, more, there was the bald remnant of a stuffed bird which had been my own daily care when it and I belonged to Raffles. And when we all filed in to prayers, through the green baize door which still separated the master's part of the house from that of the boys, there was a small boy posted in the passage to give the sign of silence to the rest assembled in the hall, quite identically as in the dim old days; the picture was absolutely unchanged; it was only we who were out of it in body and soul.

On our side of the baize door a fine hospitality and a finer flow of spirits were the order of the night. There was a sound representative assortment of quite young Old Boys, to whom ours was a prehistoric time, and in the trough of their modern chaff and chat we old stagers might well have been left far astern of the fun. Yet it was Raffles who was the life and soul of the party, and that not by meretricious virtue of his cricket. There happened not to be another cricketer among us, and it was on their own subjects that Raffles laughed with the lot in turn and in the lump. I never knew him in quite such form. I will not say he was a boy among them, but he was that rarer being, the man of the world who can enter absolutely into the fun and fervor of the salad age. My cares and my regrets had never been more acute, but Raffles seemed a man without either in his life.

He was not, however, the hero of the Old Boys' Match, and that was expected of him by all the school. There was a hush when he went in, a groan when he came out. I had no reason to suppose he was not trying; these things happen to the cricketer who plays out of his class; but when the great Raffles went on to bowl, and was hit all over the field, I was not so sure. It certainly failed to affect his spirits; he was more brilliant than ever at our hospitable board; and after dinner came

the meeting at which he and Nasmyth were to speak.

It was a somewhat frigid gathering until Nasmyth rose. We had all dined with our respective hosts, and then repaired to this business in cold blood. Many were lukewarm about it in their hearts; there was a certain amount of mild prejudice, and a greater amount of animal indifference, to be overcome in the opening speech. It is not for me to say whether this was successfully accomplished. I only know how the temperature of that meeting rose with Nipper Nasmyth.

And I dare say, in all the circumstances of the case, his really was a rather vulgar speech. But it was certainly impassioned, and probably as purely instinctive as his denunciation of all the causes which appeal to the gullible many without imposing upon the cantankerous few. His arguments, it is true, were merely an elaboration of those with which he had favored some of us already; but they were pointed by a concise exposition of the several definite principles they represented, and barbed with a caustic rhetoric quite admirable in itself. In a word, the manner was worthy of the very foundation it sought to shake, or we had never swallowed such matter without a murmur. As it was, there was a demonstration in the wilderness when the voice ceased crying. But we sat in the deeper silence when Raffles rose to reply.

I leaned forward not to lose a word. I knew my Raffles so well that I felt almost capable of reporting his speech before I heard it. Never was I more mistaken, even in him! So far from a gibe for a gibe and a taunt for a taunt, there never was softer answer than that which A. J. Raffles returned to Nipper Nasmyth before the staring eyes and startled ears of all assembled. He courteously but firmly refused to believe a word his old friend Nasmyth had said--about himself. He had known Nasmyth for twenty years, and never had he met a dog who barked so loud
and bit so little. The fact was that he had far too kind a heart to bite at all. Nasmyth might get up and protest as loud as he liked: the

speaker declared he knew him better than Nasmyth knew himself. He had the necessary defects of his great qualities. He was only too good a sportsman. He had a perfect passion for the weaker side. That alone led Nasmyth into such excesses of language as we had all heard from his lips that night. As for Raffles, he concluded his far too genial remarks by predicting that, whatever Nasmyth might say or think of the new fund, he would subscribe to it as handsomely as any of us, like "the generous good chap" that we all knew him to be.

Even so did Raffles disappoint the Old Boys in the evening as he had disappointed the school by day. We had looked to him for a noble raillery, a lofty and loyal disdain, and he had fobbed us off with friendly personalities not even in impeccable taste. Nevertheless, this light treatment of a grave offence went far to restore the natural amenities of the occasion. It was impossible even for Nasmyth to reply to it as he might to a more earnest onslaught. He could but smile sardonically, and audibly undertake to prove Raffles a false prophet; and though subsequent speakers were less merciful the note was struck, and there was no more bad blood in the debate. There was plenty, however, in the veins of Nasmyth, as I was to discover for myself before the night was out.

You might think that in the circumstances he would not have attended the head master's ball with which the evening ended; but that would be sadly to misjudge so perverse a creature as the notorious Nipper. He was probably one of those who protest that there is "nothing personal" in their most personal attacks. Not that Nasmyth took this tone about Raffles when he and I found ourselves cheek by jowl against the ballroom wall; he could forgive his franker critics, but not the friendly enemy who had treated him so much more gently than he deserved.

"I seem to have seen you with this great man Raffles," began Nasmyth, as he overhauled me with his fighting eye. "Do you know him well?"

"Intimately."

"I remember now. You were with him when he forced himself upon me on the way down yesterday. He had to tell me who he was. Yet he talks as though we were old friends."

"You were in the upper sixth together," I rejoined, nettled by his tone.

"What does that matter? I am glad to say I had too much self-respect, and too little respect for Raffles, ever to be a friend of his then. I knew too many of the things he did," said Nipper Nasmyth.

His fluent insults had taken my breath. But in a lucky flash I saw my retort.

"You must have had special opportunities of observation, living in the town," said I; and drew first blood between the long hair and the ragged beard; but that was all.

"So he really did get out at nights?" remarked my adversary. "You certainly give your friend away. What's he doing now?"

I let my eyes follow Raffles round the room before replying. He was waltzing with a master's wife--waltzing as he did everything else. Other couples seemed to melt before them. And the woman on his arm looked a radiant girl.

"I meant in town, or wherever he lives his mysterious life," explained Nasmyth, when I told him that he could see for himself. But his clever tone did not trouble me; it was his epithet that caused me to prick my ears. And I found some difficulty in following Raffles right round the room.

"I thought everybody knew what he was doing; he's playing cricket most of his time," was my measured reply; and if it bore an extra touch of insolence, I can honestly ascribe that to my nerves.

"And is that all he does for a living?" pursued my inquisitor keenly.

"You had better ask Raffles himself," said I to that. "It's a pity you didn't ask him in public, at the meeting!"

But I was beginning to show temper in my embarrassment, and of course that made Nasmyth the more imperturbable.

"Really, he might be following some disgraceful calling, by the mystery you make of it!" he exclaimed. "And for that matter I call first-class cricket a disgraceful calling, when it's followed by men who ought to be gentlemen, but are really professionals in gentlemanly clothing. The present craze for gladiatorial athleticism I regard as one of the great evils of the age; but the thinly veiled professionalism of the so-called amateur is the greatest evil of that craze. Men play for the gentlemen and are paid more than the players who walk out of another gate. In my time there was none of that. Amateurs were amateurs and sport was sport; there were no Raffleses in first-class cricket then. I had forgotten Raffles was a modern first-class cricketer: that explains him. Rather than see my son such another, do you know what I'd prefer to see him?"

I neither knew nor cared: yet a wretched premonitory fascination held me breathless till I was told.

"I'd prefer to see him a thief!" said Nasmyth savagely; and when his eyes were done with me, he turned upon his heel. So that ended that stage of my discomfiture.

It was only to give place to a worse. Was all this accident or fell design? Conscience had made a coward of me, and yet what reason had I to disbelieve the worst? We were pirouetting on the edge of an abyss; sooner or later the false step must come and the pit swallow us. I began to wish myself back in London, and I did get back to my room in our old house. My dancing days were already over; there I had taken the one resolution to which I remained as true as better men to better vows; there the painful association was no mere sense of personal unworthiness. I fell to thinking in my room of other dances ... and was still smoking the cigarette which Raffles had taught me to appreciate when I looked up to find him regarding me from the door. He had opened it as noiselessly as only Raffles could open doors, and now he closed it in the same professional fashion.

"I missed Achilles hours ago," said he. "And still he's sulking in his tent!"

"I have been," I answered, laughing as he could always make me, "but I'll chuck it if you'll stop and smoke. Our host doesn't mind; there's an ash-tray provided for the purpose. I ought to be sulking between the sheets, but I'm ready to sit up with you till morning."

"We might do worse; but, on the other hand, we might do still better," rejoined Raffles, and for once he resisted the seductive Sullivan. "As a matter of fact, it's morning now; in another hour it will be dawn; and where could day dawn better than in Warfield Woods, or along the Stockley road, or even on the Upper or the Middle? I don't want to turn in, any more than you do. I may as well confess that the whole show down here has exalted me more than anything for years. But if we can't sleep, Bunny, let's have some fresh air instead."

"Has everybody gone to bed?" I asked.

"Long ago. I was the last in. Why?"

"Only it might sound a little odd, our turning out again, if they were to hear us."

Raffles stood over me with a smile made of mischief and cunning; but it was the purest mischief imaginable, the most innocent and comic cunning.

"They shan't hear us at all, Bunny," said he. "I mean to get out as I did in the good old nights. I've been spoiling for the chance ever since I came down. There's not the smallest harm in it now; and if you'll come with me I'll show you how it used to be done."

"But I know," said I. "Who used to haul up the rope after you, and let it down again to the minute?"

Raffles looked down on me from lowered lids, over a smile too humorous to offend.

"My dear good Bunny! And do you suppose that even then I had only one way of doing a thing? I've had a spare loophole all my life, and when you're ready I'll show you what it was when I was here. Take off those boots, and carry your tennis-shoes; slip on another coat; put out your light; and I'll meet you on the landing in two minutes."

He met me with uplifted finger, and not a syllable; and down-stairs he led me, stocking soles close against the skirting, two feet to each particular step. It must have seemed child's play to Raffles; the old precautions were obviously assumed for my entertainment; but I confess that to me it was all refreshingly exciting--for once without a risk of durance if we came to grief! With scarcely a creak we reached the hall, and could have walked out of the street door without danger or difficulty. But that would not do for Raffles. He must needs lead me into the boys' part, through the green baize door. It took a deal of opening and shutting, but Raffles seemed to enjoy nothing better than

these mock obstacles, and in a few minutes we were resting with sharp ears in the boys' hall.

"Through these windows?" I whispered, when the clock over the piano had had matters its own way long enough to make our minds quite easy.

"How else?" whispered Raffles, as he opened the one on whose ledge our letters used to await us of a morning.

"And then through the quad--"

"And over the gates at the end. No talking, Bunny; there's a dormitory just overhead; but ours was in front, you remember, and if they had ever seen me I should have nipped back this way while they were watching the other."

His finger was on his lips as we got out softly into the starlight. I remember how the gravel hurt as we left the smooth flagged margin of the house for the open quad; but the nearer of two long green seats (whereon you prepared your construe for the second-school in the summer term) was mercifully handy; and once in our rubber soles we had no difficulty in scaling the gates beyond the fives-courts. Moreover, we dropped into a very desert of a country road, nor saw a soul when we doubled back beneath the outer study windows, nor heard a footfall in the main street of the slumbering town. Our own fell like the night-dews and the petals of the poet; but Raffles ran his arm through mine, and would chatter in whispers as we went.

"So you and Nipper had a word--or was it words? I saw you out of the tail of my eye when I was dancing, and I heard you out of the tail of my ear. It sounded like words, Bunny, and I thought I caught my name. He's the most consistent man I know, and the least altered from a boy. But he'll subscribe all right, you'll see, and be very glad I made him."

I whispered back that I did not believe it for a moment. Raffles had not heard all Nasmyth had said of him. And neither would he listen to the little I meant to repeat to him; he would but reiterate a conviction so chimerical to my mind that I interrupted in my turn to ask him what ground he had for it.

"I've told you already," said Raffles. "I mean to make him."

"But how?" I asked. "And when, and where?"

"At Philippi, Bunny, where I said I'd see him. What a rabbit you are at a quotation!

"'And I think that the field of Philippi
Was where Caesar came to an end;
But who gave old Brutus the tip, I
Can't comprehend!'

"You may have forgotten your Shakespeare, Bunny, but you ought to remember that."

And I did, vaguely, but had no idea what it or Raffles meant, as I plainly told him.

"The theatre of war," he answered--"and here we are at the stage door!"

Raffles had stopped suddenly in his walk. It was the last dark hour of the summer night, but the light from a neighboring lamppost showed me the look on his face as he turned.

"I think you also inquired when," he continued. "Well, then, this minute--if you will give me a leg up!"

And behind him, scarcely higher than his head, and not even barred, was

a wide window with a wire blind, and the name of Nasmyth among others lettered in gold upon the wire.

"You're never going to break in?"

"This instant, if you'll, help me; in five or ten minutes, if you won't."

"Surely you didn't bring the--the tools?"

He jingled them gently in his pocket.

"Not the whole outfit, Bunny. But you never know when you mayn't want one or two. I'm only thankful I didn't leave the lot behind this time. I very nearly did."

"I must say I thought you would, coming down here," I said reproachfully.

"But you ought to be glad I didn't," he rejoined with a smile. "It's going to mean old Nasmyth's subscription to the Founder's Fund, and that's to be a big one, I promise you! The lucky thing is that I went so far as to bring my bunch of safekeys. Now, are you going to help me use them, or are you not? If so, now's your minute; if not, clear out and be--"

"Not so fast, Raffles," said I testily. "You must have planned this before you came down, or you would never have brought all those things with you."

"My dear Bunny, they're a part of my kit! I take them wherever I take my evening-clothes. As to this potty bank, I never even thought of it, much less that it would become a public duty to draw a hundred or so without signing for it. That's all I shall touch, Bunny--I'm not on

the make to-night. There's no risk in it either. If I am caught I shall simply sham champagne and stand the racket; it would be an obvious frolic after what happened at that meeting. And they will catch me, if I stand talking here: you run away back to bed--unless you're quite determined to 'give old Brutus the tip!'"

Now we had barely been a minute whispering where we stood, and the whole street was still as silent as the tomb. To me there seemed least danger in discussing the matter quietly on the spot. But even as he gave me my dismissal Raffles turned and caught the sill above him, first with one hand and then with the other. His legs swung like a pendulum as he drew himself up with one arm, then shifted the position of the other hand, and very gradually worked himself waist-high with the sill. But the sill was too narrow for him; that was as far as he could get unaided; and it was as much as I could bear to see of a feat which in itself might have hardened my conscience and softened my heart. But I had identified his doggerel verse at last. I am ashamed to say that it was part of a set of my very own writing in the school magazine of my time. So Raffles knew the stuff better than I did myself, and yet scorned to press his flattery to win me over! He had won me: in a second my rounded shoulders were a pedestal for those dangling feet. And before many more I heard the old metallic snap, followed by the raising of a sash so slowly and gently as to be almost inaudible to me listening just below.

Raffles went through hands first, disappeared for an instant, then leaned out, lowering his hands for me.

"Come on, Bunny! You're safer in than out. Hang on to the sill and let me get you under the arms. Now all together--quietly does it--and over you come!"

No need to dwell on our proceedings in the bank. I myself had small part in the scene, being posted rather in the wings, at the foot of the

stairs leading to the private premises in which the manager had his domestic being. But I made my mind easy about him, for in the silence of my watch I soon detected a nasal note overhead, and it was resonant and aggressive as the man himself. Of Raffles, on the contrary, I heard nothing, for he had shut the door between us, and I was to warn him if a single sound came through. I need scarcely add that no warning was necessary during the twenty minutes we remained in the bank. Raffles afterward assured me that nineteen of them had been spent in filing one key; but one of his latest inventions was a little thick velvet bag in which he carried the keys; and this bag had two elastic mouths, which closed so tightly about either wrist that he could file away, inside, and scarcely hear it himself. As for these keys, they were clever counterfeits of typical patterns by two great safe-making firms. And Raffles had come by them in a manner all his own, which the criminal world may discover for itself.

When he opened the door and beckoned to me, I knew by his face that he had succeeded to his satisfaction, and by experience better than to question him on the point. Indeed, the first thing was to get out of the bank; for the stars were drowning in a sky of ink and water, and it was a comfort to feel that we could fly straight to our beds. I said so in whispers as Raffles cautiously opened our window and peeped out. In an instant his head was in, and for another I feared the worst.

"What was that, Bunny? No, you don't, my son! There's not a soul in sight that I can see, but you never know, and we may as well lay a scent while we're about it. Ready? Then follow me, and never mind the window."

With that he dropped softly into the street, and I after him, turning to the right instead of the left, and that at a brisk trot instead of the innocent walk which had brought us to the bank. Like mice we scampered past the great schoolroom, with its gable snipping a paler sky than ever, and the shadows melting even in the colonnade

underneath. Masters' houses flitted by on the left, lesser landmarks on either side, and presently we were running our heads into the dawn, one under either hedge of the Stockley road.

"Did you see that light in Nab's just now?" cried Raffles as he led.

"No; why?" I panted, nearly spent.

"It was in Nab's dressing-room.

"Yes?"

"I've seen it there before," continued Raffles. "He never was a good sleeper, and his ears reach to the street. I wouldn't like to say how often I was chased by him in the small hours! I believe he knew who it was toward the end, but Nab was not the man to accuse you of what he couldn't prove."

I had no breath for comment. And on sped Raffles like a yacht before the wind, and on I blundered like a wherry at sea, making heavy weather all the way, and nearer foundering at every stride. Suddenly, to my deep relief, Raffles halted, but only to tell me to stop my pipes while he listened.

"It's all right, Bunny," he resumed, showing me a glowing face in the dawn. "History's on its own tracks once more, and I'll bet you it's dear old Nab on ours! Come on, Bunny; run to the last gasp, and leave the rest to me."

I was past arguing, and away he went. There was no help for it but to follow as best I could. Yet I had vastly preferred to collapse on the spot, and trust to Raffles's resource, as before very long I must. I had never enjoyed long wind and the hours that we kept in town may well have aggravated the deficiency. Raffles, however, was in first-class

training from first-class cricket, and he had no mercy on Nab or me. But the master himself was an old Oxford miler, who could still bear it better than I; nay, as I flagged and stumbled, I heard him pounding steadily behind.

"Come on, come on, or he'll do us!" cried Raffles shrilly over his shoulder; and a gruff sardonic laugh came back over mine. It was pearly morning now, but we had run into a shallow mist that took me by the throat and stabbed me to the lungs. I coughed and coughed, and stumbled in my stride, until down I went, less by accident than to get it over, and so lay headlong in my tracks. And old Nab dealt me a verbal kick as he passed.

"You beast!" he growled, as I have known him growl it in form.

But Raffles himself had abandoned the flight on hearing my downfall, and I was on hands and knees just in time to see the meeting between him and old Nab. And there stood Raffles in the silvery mist, laughing with his whole light heart, leaning back to get the full flavor of his mirth; and, nearer me, sturdy old Nab, dour and grim, with beads of dew on the hoary beard that had been lamp-black in our time.

"So I've caught you at last!" said he. "After more years than I mean to count!"

"Then you're luckier than we are, sir," answered Raffles, "for I fear our man has given us the slip."

"Your man!" echoed Nab. His bushy eyebrows had shot up: it was as much
as I could do to keep my own in their place.

"We were indulging in the chase ourselves," explained Raffles, "and one of us has suffered for his zeal, as you can see. It is even possible

that we, too, have been chasing a perfectly innocent man."

"Not to say a reformed character," said our pursuer dryly. "I suppose you don't mean a member of the school?" he added, pinking his man suddenly as of yore, with all the old barbed acumen. But Raffles was now his match.

"That would be carrying reformation rather far, sir. No, as I say, I may have been mistaken in the first instance; but I had put out my light and was looking out of the window when I saw a fellow behaving quite suspiciously. He was carrying his boots and creeping along in his socks--which must be why you never heard him, sir. They make less noise than rubber soles even--that is, they must, you know! Well, Bunny had just left me, so I hauled him out and we both crept down to play detective. No sign of the fellow! We had a look in the colonnade--I thought I heard him--and that gave us no end of a hunt for nothing. But just as we were leaving he came padding past under our noses, and that's where we took up the chase. Where he'd been in the meantime I have no idea; very likely he'd done no harm; but it seemed worth while finding out. He had too good a start, though, and poor Bunny had too bad a wind."

"You should have gone on and let me rip," said I, climbing to my feet at last.

"As it is, however, we will all let the other fellow do so," said old Nab in a genial growl. "And you two had better turn into my house and have something to keep the morning cold out."

You may imagine with what alacrity we complied; and yet I am bound to confess that I had never liked Nab at school. I still remember my term in his form. He had a caustic tongue and fine assortment of damaging epithets, most of which were levelled at my devoted skull during those three months. I now discovered that he also kept a particularly mellow

Scotch whiskey, an excellent cigar, and a fund of anecdote of which a mordant wit was the worthy bursar. Enough to add that he kept us laughing in his study until the chapel bells rang him out.

As for Raffles, he appeared to me to feel far more compunction for the fable which he had been compelled to foist upon one of the old masters than for the immeasurably graver offence against society and another Old Boy. This, indeed, did not worry him at all; and the story was received next day with absolute credulity on all sides. Nasmyth himself was the first to thank us both for our spirited effort on his behalf; and the incident had the ironic effect of establishing an immediate entente cordiale between Raffles and his very latest victim. I must confess, however, that for my own part I was thoroughly uneasy during the Old Boys' second innings, when Raffles made a selfish score, instead of standing by me to tell his own story in his own way. There was never any knowing with what new detail he was about to embellish it: and I have still to receive full credit for the tact that it required to follow his erratic lead convincingly. Seldom have I been more thankful than when our train started next morning, and the poor, unsuspecting Nasmyth himself waved us a last farewell from the platform.

"Lucky we weren't staying at Nab's," said Raffles, as he lit a Sullivan and opened his Daily Mail at its report of the robbery. "There was one thing Nab would have spotted like the downy old bird he always was and will be."

"What was that?"

"The front door must have been found duly barred and bolted in the morning, and yet we let them assume that we came out that way. Nab would have pounced on the point, and by this time we might have been nabbed ourselves."

It was but a little over a hundred sovereigns that Raffles had taken,

and, of course, he had resolutely eschewed any and every form of paper money. He posted his own first contribution of twenty-five pounds to the Founder's Fund immediately on our return to town, before rushing off to more first-class cricket, and I gathered that the rest would follow piecemeal as he deemed it safe. By an odd coincidence, however, a mysterious but magnificent donation of a hundred guineas was almost simultaneously received in notes by the treasurer of the Founder's Fund, from one who simply signed himself "Old Boy." The treasurer happened to be our late host, the new man at our old house, and he wrote to congratulate Raffles on what he was pleased to consider a direct result of the latter's speech. I did not see the letter that Raffles wrote in reply, but in due course I heard the name of the mysterious contributor. He was said to be no other than Nipper Nasmyth himself. I asked Raffles if it was true. He replied that he would ask old Nipper point-blank if he came up as usual to the Varsity match, and if they had the luck to meet. And not only did this happen, but I had the greater luck to be walking round the ground with Raffles when we encountered our shabby friend in front of the pavilion.

"My dear fellow," cried Raffles, "I hear it was you who gave that hundred guineas by stealth to the very movement you denounced. Don't deny it, and don't blush to find it fame. Listen to me. There was a great lot in what you said; but it's the kind of thing we ought all to back, whether we strictly approve of it in our hearts or not."

"Exactly, Raffles, but the fact is--"

"I know what you're going to say. Don't say it. There's not one in a thousand who would do as you've done, and not one in a million who would do it anonymously."

"But what makes you think I did it, Raffles?"

"Everybody is saying so. You will find it all over the place when you

get back. You will find yourself the most popular man down there, Nasmyth!"

I never saw a nobler embarrassment than that of this awkward, ungainly, cantankerous man: all his angles seemed to have been smoothed away: there was something quite human in the flushed, undecided, wistful face.

"I never was popular in my life," he said. "I don't want to buy my popularity now. To be perfectly candid with you, Raffles--"

"Don't! I can't stop to hear. They're ringing the bell. But you shouldn't have been angry with me for saying you were a generous good chap, Nasmyth, when you were one all the time. Good-by, old fellow!"

But Nasmyth detained us a second more. His hesitation was at an end. There was a sudden new light in his face.

"Was I?" he cried. "Then I'll make it two hundred, and damn the odds!"

Raffles was a thoughtful man as we went to our seats. He saw nobody, would acknowledge no remark. Neither did he attend to the cricket for the first half-hour after lunch; instead, he eventually invited me to come for a stroll on the practice ground, where, however, we found two chairs aloof from the fascinating throng.

"I am not often sorry, Bunny, as you know," he began. "But I have been sorry since the interval. I've been sorry for poor old Nipper Nasmyth. Did you see the idea of being popular dawn upon him for the first time in his life?"

"I did; but you had nothing to do with that, my dear man."

Raffles shook his head over me as our eyes met. "I had everything to do with it. I tried to make him tell the meanest lie. I made sure he

would, and for that matter he nearly did. Then, at the last moment, he saw how to hedge things with his conscience. And his second hundred will be a real gift."

"You mean under his own name--"

"And with his own free-will. My good Bunny, is it possible you don't know what I did with the hundred we drew from that bank!"

"I knew what you were going to do with it," said I. "I didn't know you had actually got further than the twenty-five you told me you were sending as your own contribution."

Raffles rose abruptly from his chair.

"And you actually thought that came out of his money?"

"Naturally."

"In my name?"

"I thought so."

Raffles stared at me inscrutably for some moments, and for some more at the great white numbers over the grand-stand.

"We may as well have another look at the cricket," said he. "It's difficult to see the board from here, but I believe there's another man out."

ABORIGINES

The Project Gutenberg EBook #13414
of *Love and Other Stories*, by Anton Chekhov

BETWEEN nine and ten in the morning. Ivan Lyashkevsky, a lieutenant of Polish origin, who has at some time or other been wounded in the head, and now lives on his pension in a town in one of the southern provinces, is sitting in his lodgings at the open window talking to Franz Stepanitch Finks, the town architect, who has come in to see him for a minute. Both have thrust their heads out of the window, and are looking in the direction of the gate near which Lyashkevsky's landlord, a plump little native with pendulous perspiring cheeks, in full, blue trousers, is sitting on a bench with his waistcoat unbuttoned. The native is plunged in deep thought, and is absent-mindedly prodding the toe of his boot with a stick.

"Extraordinary people, I tell you," grumbled Lyashkevsky, looking angrily at the native, "here he has sat down on the bench, and so he will sit, damn the fellow, with his hands folded till evening. They do absolutely nothing. The wastrels and loafers! It would be all right, you scoundrel, if you had money lying in the bank, or had a farm of your own where others would be working for you, but here you have not a penny to your name, you eat the bread of others, you are in debt all round, and you starve your family--devil take you! You wouldn't believe me, Franz Stepanitch, sometimes it makes me so cross that I could jump out of the window and give the low fellow a good horse-whipping. Come, why don't you work? What are you sitting there for?"

The native looks indifferently at Lyashkevsky, tries to say something but cannot; sloth and the sultry heat have paralysed his conversational faculties. . . . Yawning lazily, he makes the sign of the cross over his mouth, and turns his eyes up towards the sky where pigeons fly, bathing in the hot air.

"You must not be too severe in your judgments, honoured friend," sighs Finks, mopping his big bald head with his handkerchief. "Put yourself in their place: business is slack now, there's unemployment all round, a bad harvest, stagnation in trade."

"Good gracious, how you talk!" cries Lyashkevsky in indignation, angrily wrapping his dressing gown round him. "Supposing he has no job and no trade, why doesn't he work in his own home, the devil flay him! I say! Is there no work for you at home? Just look, you brute! Your steps have come to pieces, the plankway is falling into the ditch, the fence is rotten; you had better set to and mend it all, or if you don't know how, go into the kitchen and help your wife. Your wife is running out every minute to fetch water or carry out the slops. Why shouldn't you run instead, you rascal? And then you must remember, Franz Stepanitch, that he has six acres of garden, that he has pigsties and poultry houses, but it is all wasted and no use. The flower garden is overgrown with weeds and almost baked dry, while the boys play ball in the kitchen garden. Isn't he a lazy brute? I assure you, though I have only the use of an acre and a half with my lodgings, you will always find radishes, and salad, and fennel, and onions, while that blackguard buys everything at the market."

"He is a Russian, there is no doing anything with him," said Finks with a condescending smile; "it's in the Russian blood. . . . They are a very lazy people! If all property were given to Germans or Poles, in a year's time you would not recognise the town."

The native in the blue trousers beckons a girl with a sieve, buys a kopeck's worth of sunflower seeds from her and begins cracking them.

"A race of curs!" says Lyashkevsky angrily. "That's their only

occupation, they crack sunflower seeds and they talk politics! The devil take them!"

Staring wrathfully at the blue trousers, Lyashkevsky is gradually roused to fury, and gets so excited that he actually foams at the mouth. He speaks with a Polish accent, rapping out each syllable venomously, till at last the little bags under his eyes swell, and he abandons the Russian "scoundrels, blackguards, and rascals," and rolling his eyes, begins pouring out a shower of Polish oaths, coughing from his efforts. "Lazy dogs, race of curs. May the devil take them!"

The native hears this abuse distinctly, but, judging from the appearance of his crumpled little figure, it does not affect him. Apparently he has long ago grown as used to it as to the buzzing of the flies, and feels it superfluous to protest. At every visit Finks has to listen to a tirade on the subject of the lazy good-for-nothing aborigines, and every time exactly the same one.

"But . . . I must be going," he says, remembering that he has no time to spare. "Good-bye!"

"Where are you off to?"

"I only looked in on you for a minute. The wall of the cellar has cracked in the girls' high school, so they asked me to go round at once to look at it. I must go."

"H'm. . . . I have told Varvara to get the samovar," says Lyashkevsky, surprised. "Stay a little, we will have some tea; then you shall go."

Finks obediently puts down his hat on the table and remains to drink tea. Over their tea Lyashkevsky maintains that the natives are

hopelessly ruined, that there is only one thing to do, to take them all indiscriminately and send them under strict escort to hard labour.

"Why, upon my word," he says, getting hot, "you may ask what does that goose sitting there live upon! He lets me lodgings in his house for seven roubles a month, and he goes to name-day parties, that's all that he has to live on, the knave, may the devil take him! He has neither earnings nor an income. They are not merely sluggards and wastrels, they are swindlers too, they are continually borrowing money from the town bank, and what do they do with it? They plunge into some scheme such as sending bulls to Moscow, or building oil presses on a new system; but to send bulls to Moscow or to press oil you want to have a head on your shoulders, and these rascals have pumpkins on theirs! Of course all their schemes end in smoke . . . . They waste their money, get into a mess, and then snap their fingers at the bank. What can you get out of them? Their houses are mortgaged over and over again, they have no other property--it's all been drunk and eaten up long ago. Nine-tenths of them are swindlers, the scoundrels! To borrow money and not return it is their rule. Thanks to them the town bank is going smash!"

"I was at Yegorov's yesterday," Finks interrupts the Pole, anxious to change the conversation, "and only fancy, I won six roubles and a half from him at picquet."

"I believe I still owe you something at picquet," Lyashkevsky recollects, "I ought to win it back. Wouldn't you like one game?"

"Perhaps just one," Finks assents. "I must make haste to the high school, you know."

Lyashkevsky and Finks sit down at the open window and begin a game of picquet. The native in the blue trousers stretches with relish,

and husks of sunflower seeds fall in showers from all over him on to the ground. At that moment from the gate opposite appears another native with a long beard, wearing a crumpled yellowish-grey cotton coat. He screws up his eyes affectionately at the blue trousers and shouts:

"Good-morning, Semyon Nikolaitch, I have the honour to congratulate you on the Thursday."

"And the same to you, Kapiton Petrovitch!"

"Come to my seat! It's cool here!"

The blue trousers, with much sighing and groaning and waddling from side to side like a duck, cross the street.

"Tierce major . . ." mutters Lyashkevsky, "from the queen. . . . Five and fifteen. . . . The rascals are talking of politics. . . . Do you hear? They have begun about England. I have six hearts."

"I have the seven spades. My point."

"Yes, it's yours. Do you hear? They are abusing Beaconsfield. They don't know, the swine, that Beaconsfield has been dead for ever so long. So I have twenty-nine. . . . Your lead."

"Eight . . . nine . . . ten . . . . Yes, amazing people, these Russians! Eleven . . . twelve. . . . The Russian inertia is unique on the terrestrial globe."

"Thirty . . . Thirty-one. . . . One ought to take a good whip, you know. Go out and give them Beaconsfield. I say, how their tongues are wagging! It's easier to babble than to work. I suppose you threw away the queen of clubs and I didn't realise it."

"Thirteen . . . Fourteen. . . . It's unbearably hot! One must be made of iron to sit in such heat on a seat in the full sun! Fifteen."

The first game is followed by a second, the second by a third. . . . Finks loses, and by degrees works himself up into a gambling fever and forgets all about the cracking walls of the high school cellar. As Lyashkevsky plays he keeps looking at the aborigines. He sees them, entertaining each other with conversation, go to the open gate, cross the filthy yard and sit down on a scanty patch of shade under an aspen tree. Between twelve and one o'clock the fat cook with brown legs spreads before them something like a baby's sheet with brown stains upon it, and gives them their dinner. They eat with wooden spoons, keep brushing away the flies, and go on talking.

"The devil, it is beyond everything," cries Lyashkevsky, revolted. "I am very glad I have not a gun or a revolver or I should have a shot at those cattle. I have four knaves--fourteen. . . . Your point. . . . It really gives me a twitching in my legs. I can't see those ruffians without being upset."

"Don't excite yourself, it is bad for you."

"But upon my word, it is enough to try the patience of a stone!"

When he has finished dinner the native in blue trousers, worn out and exhausted, staggering with laziness and repletion, crosses the street to his own house and sinks feebly on to his bench. He is struggling with drowsiness and the gnats, and is looking about him as dejectedly as though he were every minute expecting his end. His helpless air drives Lyashkevsky out of all patience. The Pole pokes his head out of the window and shouts at him, spluttering:

"Been gorging? Ah, the old woman! The sweet darling. He has been

stuffing himself, and now he doesn't know what to do with his tummy! Get out of my sight, you confounded fellow! Plague take you!"

The native looks sourly at him, and merely twiddles his fingers instead of answering. A school-boy of his acquaintance passes by him with his satchel on his back. Stopping him the native ponders a long time what to say to him, and asks:

"Well, what now?"

"Nothing."

"How, nothing?"

"Why, just nothing."

"H'm. . . . And which subject is the hardest?"

"That's according." The school-boy shrugs his shoulders.

"I see--er . . . What is the Latin for tree?"

"Arbor."

"Aha. . . . And so one has to know all that," sighs the blue trousers. "You have to go into it all. . . . It's hard work, hard work. . . . Is your dear Mamma well?"

"She is all right, thank you."

"Ah. . . . Well, run along."

After losing two roubles Finks remembers the high school and is horrified.

"Holy Saints, why it's three o'clock already. How I have been staying on. Good-bye, I must run. . . ."

"Have dinner with me, and then go," says Lyashkevsky. "You have plenty of time."

Finks stays, but only on condition that dinner shall last no more than ten minutes. After dining he sits for some five minutes on the sofa and thinks of the cracked wall, then resolutely lays his head on the cushion and fills the room with a shrill whistling through his nose. While he is asleep, Lyashkevsky, who does not approve of an afternoon nap, sits at the window, stares at the dozing native, and grumbles:

"Race of curs! I wonder you don't choke with laziness. No work, no intellectual or moral interests, nothing but vegetating . . . . disgusting. Tfoo!"

At six o'clock Finks wakes up.

"It's too late to go to the high school now," he says, stretching. "I shall have to go to-morrow, and now. . . . How about my revenge? Let's have one more game. . . ."

After seeing his visitor off, between nine and ten, Lyashkevsky looks after him for some time, and says:

"Damn the fellow, staying here the whole day and doing absolutely nothing. . . . Simply get their salary and do no work; the devil take them! . . . The German pig. . . ."

He looks out of the window, but the native is no longer there. He has gone to bed. There is no one to grumble at, and for the first

time in the day he keeps his mouth shut, but ten minutes passes and he cannot restrain the depression that overpowers him, and begins to grumble, shoving the old shabby armchair:

"You only take up room, rubbishly old thing! You ought to have been burnt long ago, but I keep forgetting to tell them to chop you up. It's a disgrace!"

And as he gets into bed he presses his hand on a spring of the mattress, frowns and says peevishly:

"The con--found--ed spring! It will cut my side all night. I will tell them to rip up the mattress to-morrow and get you out, you useless thing."

He falls asleep at midnight, and dreams that he is pouring boiling water over the natives, Finks, and the old armchair.

LONG ODDS, By H. Rider Haggard
from The Project Gutenberg EBook #1980
of *Stories by English Authors: Africa*, by Various

The story which is narrated in the following pages came to me from the lips of my old friend Allan Quatermain, or Hunter Quatermain, as we used to call him in South Africa. He told it to me one evening when I was stopping with him at the place he bought in Yorkshire. Shortly after that, the death of his only son so unsettled him that he immediately left England, accompanied by two companions, his old fellow-voyagers, Sir Henry Curtis and Captain Good, and has now utterly vanished into the dark heart of Africa. He is persuaded that a white people, of which he has heard rumours all his life, exists somewhere on the highlands in the vast, still unexplored interior, and his great ambition is to find them before he dies. This is the wild quest upon which he and his companions have departed, and from which I shrewdly suspect they never will return. One letter only have I received from the old gentleman, dated from a mission station high up the Tana, a river on the east coast, about three hundred miles north of Zanzibar; in it he says that they have gone through many hardships and adventures, but are alive and well, and have found traces which go far toward making him hope that the results of their wild quest may be a "magnificent and unexampled discovery." I greatly fear, however, that all he has discovered is death; for this letter came a long while ago, and nobody has heard a single word of the party since. They have totally vanished.

It was on the last evening of my stay at his house that he told the ensuing story to me and Captain Good, who was dining with him. He had eaten his dinner and drunk two or three glasses of old port, just to help Good and myself to the end of the second bottle. It was an unusual thing for him to do, for he was a most abstemious man, having conceived, as he used to say, a great horror of drink from observing its effects upon the class of colonists--hunters, transport-riders and others--amongst whom he had passed so many years of his life.

Consequently the good wine took more effect on him than it would have done on most men, sending a little flush into his wrinkled cheeks, and making him talk more freely than usual.

Dear old man! I can see him now, as he went limping up and down the vestibule, with his gray hair sticking up in scrubbing-brush fashion, his shrivelled yellow face, and his large dark eyes, that were as keen as any hawk's, and yet soft as a buck's. The whole room was hung with trophies of his numerous hunting expeditions, and he had some story about every one of them, if only he could be got to tell it. Generally he would not, for he was not very fond of narrating his own adventures, but to-night the port wine made him more communicative.

"Ah, you brute!" he said, stopping beneath an unusually large skull of a lion, which was fixed just over the mantelpiece, beneath a long row of guns, its jaws distended to their utmost width. "Ah, you brute! you have given me a lot of trouble for the last dozen years, and will, I suppose to my dying day."

"Tell us the yarn, Quatermain," said Good. "You have often promised to tell me, and you never have."

"You had better not ask me to," he answered, "for it is a longish one."

"All right," I said, "the evening is young, and there is some more port."

Thus adjured, he filled his pipe from a jar of coarse-cut Boer tobacco that was always standing on the mantelpiece, and still walking up and down the room, began:

"It was, I think, in the March of '69 that I was up in Sikukuni's country. It was just after old Sequati's time, and Sikukuni had got into power--I forget how. Anyway, I was there. I had heard that the Bapedi

people had brought down an enormous quantity of ivory from the interior, and so I started with a waggon-load of goods, and came straight away from Middelburg to try and trade some of it. It was a risky thing to go into the country so early, on account of the fever; but I knew that there were one or two others after that lot of ivory, so I determined to have a try for it, and take my chance of fever. I had become so tough from continual knocking about that I did not set it down at much. Well, I got on all right for a while. It is a wonderfully beautiful piece of bush veldt, with great ranges of mountains running through it, and round granite koppies starting up here and there, looking out like sentinels over the rolling waste of bush. But it is very hot,--hot as a stew-pan,--and when I was there that March, which, of course, is autumn in this part of Africa, the whole place reeked of fever. Every morning, as I trekked along down by the Oliphant River, I used to creep from the waggon at dawn and look out. But there was no river to be seen--only a long line of billows of what looked like the finest cotton-wool tossed up lightly with a pitchfork. It was the fever mist. Out from among the scrub, too, came little spirals of vapour, as though there were hundreds of tiny fires alight in it--reek rising from thousands of tons of rotting vegetation. It was a beautiful place, but the beauty was the beauty of death; and all those lines and blots of vapour wrote one great word across the surface of the country, and that word was 'fever.'

"It was a dreadful year of illness that. I came, I remember, to one little kraal of knobnoses, and went up to it to see if I could get some _maas_ (curdled butter-milk) and a few mealies. As I got near I was struck with the silence of the place. No children began to chatter, and no dogs barked. Nor could I see any native sheep or cattle. The place, though it had evidently been recently inhabited, was as still as the bush round it, and some guinea-fowl got up out of the prickly pear bushes right at the kraal gate. I remember that I hesitated a little before going in, there was such an air of desolation about the spot. Nature never looks desolate when man has not yet laid his hand upon her breast; she is only lovely. But when man has been, and has passed away,

then she looks desolate.

"Well, I passed into the kraal, and went up to the principal hut. In front of the hut was something with an old sheepskin _kaross_ (rug) thrown over it. I stooped down and drew off the rug, and then shrank back amazed, for under it was the body of a young woman recently dead. For a moment I thought of turning back, but my curiosity overcame me; so going past the dead woman, I went down on my hands and knees and crept
into the hut. It was so dark that I could not see anything, though I could smell a great deal, so I lit a match. It was a 'tandstickor' match, and burnt slowly and dimly, and as the light gradually increased I made out what I took to be a family of people, men, women, and children, fast asleep. Presently it burnt up brightly, and I saw that they too, five of them altogether, were quite dead. One was a baby. I dropped the match in a hurry, and was making my way out of the hut as hard as I could go, when I caught sight of two bright eyes staring out of a corner. Thinking it was a wild cat, or some such animal, I redoubled my haste, when suddenly a voice near the eyes began first to mutter, and then to send up a succession of awful yells. Hastily I lit another match, and perceived that the eyes belonged to an old woman, wrapped up in a greasy leather garment. Taking her by the arm, I dragged her out, for she could not, or would not, come by herself, and the stench was overpowering me. Such a sight as she was--a bag of bones, covered over with black, shrivelled parchment. The only white thing about her was her wool, and she seemed to be pretty well dead except for her eyes and her voice. She thought that I was a devil come to take her, and that is why she yelled so. Well, I got her down to the waggon, and gave her a 'tot' of Cape smoke, and then, as soon as it was ready, poured about a pint of beef-tea down her throat, made from the flesh of a blue vilder-beeste I had killed the day before, and after that she brightened up wonderfully. She could talk Zulu,--indeed, it turned out that she had run away from Zululand in T'Chaka's time,--and she told me that all the people whom I had seen had died of fever. When they had

died the other inhabitants of the kraal had taken the cattle and gone away, leaving the poor old woman, who was helpless from age and infirmity, to perish of starvation or disease, as the case might be. She had been sitting there for three days among the bodies when I found her. I took her on to the next kraal, and gave the headman a blanket to look after her, promising him another if I found her well when I came back. I remember that he was much astonished at my parting with two blankets for the sake of such a worthless old creature. 'Why did I not leave her in the bush?' he asked. Those people carry the doctrine of the survival of the fittest to its extreme, you see.

"It was the night after I had got rid of the old woman that I made my first acquaintance with my friend yonder," and he nodded toward the skull that seemed to be grinning down at us in the shadow of the wide mantel-shelf. "I had trekked from dawn till eleven o'clock,--a long trek,--but I wanted to get on; and then had turned the oxen out to graze, sending the voorlooper to look after them, meaning to inspan again about six o'clock, and trek with the moon till ten. Then I got into the waggon and had a good sleep till half-past two or so in the afternoon, when I rose and cooked some meat, and had my dinner, washing
it down with a pannikin of black coffee; for it was difficult to get preserved milk in those days. Just as I had finished, and the driver, a man called Tom, was washing up the things, in comes the young scoundrel of a voorlooper driving one ox before him.

"'Where are the other oxen?' I asked.

"'Koos!' he said, 'Koos! (chief) the other oxen have gone away. I turned my back for a minute, and when I looked round again they were all gone except Kaptein, here, who was rubbing his back against a tree.'

"'You mean that you have been asleep, and let them stray, you villain. I will rub your back against a stick,' I answered, feeling very angry, for

it was not a pleasant prospect to be stuck up in that fever-trap for a week or so while we were hunting for the oxen. 'Off you go, and you too, Tom, and mind you don't come back till you have found them. They have trekked back along the Middelburg Road, and are a dozen miles off by now, I'll be bound. Now, no words; go, both of you.'

"Tom, the driver, swore and caught the lad a hearty kick, which he richly deserved, and then, having tied old Kaptein up to the disselboom with a riem, they took their assegais and sticks, and started. I would have gone too, only I knew that somebody must look after the waggon, and
I did not like to leave either of the boys with it at night. I was in a very bad temper, indeed, although I was pretty well used to these sort of occurrences, and soothed myself by taking a rifle and going to kill something. For a couple of hours I poked about without seeing anything that I could get a shot at, but at last, just as I was again within seventy yards of the waggon, I put up an old Impala ram from behind a mimosa-thorn. He ran straight for the waggon, and it was not till he was passing within a few feet of it that I could get a decent shot at him. Then I pulled, and caught him half-way down the spine; over he went, dead as a door-nail, and a pretty shot it was, though I ought not to say it. This little incident put me into rather a better temper, especially as the buck had rolled right against the after part of the waggon, so I had only to gut him, fix a riem round his legs, and haul him up. By the time I had done this the sun was down, and the full moon was up, and a beautiful moon it was. And then there came that wonderful hush which sometimes falls over the African bush in the early hours of the night. No beast was moving, and no bird called. Not a breath of air stirred the quiet trees, and the shadows did not even quiver, they only grew. It was very oppressive and very lonely, for there was not a sign of the cattle or the boys. I was quite thankful for the society of old Kaptein, who was lying down contentedly against the disselboom, chewing the cud with a good conscience.

"Presently, however, Kaptein began to get restless. First he snorted, then he got up and snorted again. I could not make it out, so like a fool I got down off the waggon-box to have a look round, thinking it might be the lost oxen coming.

"Next instant I regretted it, for all of a sudden I heard a roar and saw something yellow flash past me and light on poor Kaptein. Then came a bellow of agony from the ox, and a crunch as the lion put his teeth through the poor brute's neck, and I began to understand what had happened. My rifle was in the waggon, and my first thought was to get hold of it, and I turned and made a bolt for it. I got my foot on the wheel and flung my body forward on to the waggon, and there I stopped as if I were frozen, and no wonder, for as I was about to spring up I heard the lion behind me, and next second I felt the brute, ay, as plainly as I can feel this table. I felt him, I say, sniffing at my left leg that was hanging down.

"My word! I did feel queer; I don't think that I ever felt so queer before. I dared not move for the life of me, and the odd thing was that I seemed to lose power over my leg, which developed an insane sort of inclination to kick out of its own mere motion--just as hysterical people want to laugh when they ought to be particularly solemn. Well, the lion sniffed and sniffed, beginning at my ankle and slowly nosing away up to my thigh. I thought that he was going to get hold then, but he did not. He only growled softly, and went back to the ox. Shifting my head a little I got a full view of him. He was about the biggest lion I ever saw,--and I have seen a great many, and he had a most tremendous black mane. What his teeth were like you can see--look there, pretty big ones, ain't they? Altogether he was a magnificent animal, and as I lay sprawling on the fore tongue of the waggon, it occurred to me that he would look uncommonly well in a cage. He stood there by the carcass of poor Kaptein, and deliberately disembowelled him as neatly as a butcher could have done. All this while I dared not move, for he kept lifting his head and keeping an eye on me as he licked his bloody chops. When

he had cleaned Kaptein out he opened his mouth and roared, and I am not exaggerating when I say that the sound shook the waggon. Instantly there came back an answering roar.

"'Heavens!' I thought, 'there is his mate.'

"Hardly was the thought out of my head when I caught sight in the moonlight of the lioness bounding along through the long grass, and after her a couple of cubs about the size of mastiffs. She stopped within a few feet of my head, and stood, and waved her tail, and fixed me with her glowing yellow eyes; but just as I thought that it was all over she turned and began to feed on Kaptein, and so did the cubs. There were the four of them within eight feet of me, growling and quarrelling, rending and tearing, and crunching poor Kaptein's bones; and there I lay shaking with terror, and the cold perspiration pouring out of me, feeling like another Daniel come to judgment in a new sense of the phrase. Presently the cubs had eaten their fill, and began to get restless. One went round to the back of the waggon and pulled at the Impala buck that hung there, and the other came round my way and commenced the sniffing game at my leg. Indeed, he did more than that, for, my trouser being hitched up a little, he began to lick the bare skin with his rough tongue. The more he licked the more he liked it, to judge from his increased vigour and the loud purring noise he made. Then I knew that the end had come, for in another second his file-like tongue would have rasped through the skin of my leg--which was luckily pretty tough--and have drawn the blood, and then there would be no chance for me. So I just lay there and thought of my sins, and prayed to the Almighty, and thought that, after all, life was a very enjoyable thing.

"And then all of a sudden I heard a crashing of bushes and the shouting and whistling of men, and there were the two boys coming back with the cattle, which they had found trekking along all together. The lions lifted their heads and listened, then without a sound bounded off--and I fainted.

"The lions came back no more that night, and by the next morning my nerves had got pretty straight again; but I was full of wrath when I thought of all that I had gone through at the hands, or rather noses, of those four lions, and of the fate of my after-ox Kaptein. He was a splendid ox, and I was very fond of him. So wroth was I that, like a fool, I determined to attack the whole family of them. It was worthy of a greenhorn out on his first hunting-trip; but I did it nevertheless. Accordingly after breakfast, having rubbed some oil upon my leg, which was very sore from the cub's tongue, I took the driver, Tom, who did not half like the job, and having armed myself with an ordinary double No. 12 smooth-bore, the first breech-loader I ever had, I started. I took the smooth-bore because it shot a bullet very well; and my experience has been that a round ball from a smooth-bore is quite as effective against a lion as an express bullet. The lion is soft, and not a difficult animal to finish if you hit him anywhere in the body. A buck takes far more killing.

"Well, I started, and the first thing I set to work to do was to try to make out whereabouts the brutes lay up for the day. About three hundred yards from the waggon was the crest of a rise covered with single mimosa-trees, dotted about in a park-like fashion, and beyond this was a stretch of open plain running down to a dry pan, or water-hole, which covered about an acre of ground, and was densely clothed with reeds, now in the sear and yellow leaf. From the farther edge of this pan the ground sloped up again to a great cleft, or nullah, which had been cut out by the action of the water, and was pretty thickly sprinkled with bush, among which grew some large trees, I forget of what sort.

"It at once struck me that the dry pan would be a likely place to find my friends in, as there is nothing a lion is fonder of than lying up in reeds, through which he can see things without being seen himself. Accordingly thither I went and prospected. Before I had got half-way round the pan I found the remains of a blue vilder-beeste that had

evidently been killed within the last three or four days and partially devoured by lions; and from other indications about I was soon assured that if the family were not in the pan that day they spent a good deal of their spare time there. But if there, the question was how to get them out; for it was clearly impossible to think of going in after them unless one was quite determined to commit suicide. Now there was a strong wind blowing from the direction of the waggon, across the reedy pan toward the bush-clad kloof or donga, and this first gave me the idea of firing the reeds, which, as I think I told you, were pretty dry. Accordingly Tom took some matches and began starting little fires to the left, and I did the same to the right. But the reeds were still green at the bottom, and we should never have got them well alight had it not been for the wind, which grew stronger and stronger as the sun climbed higher, and forced the fire into them. At last, after half an hour's trouble, the flames got a hold, and began to spread out like a fan, whereupon I went round to the farther side of the pan to wait for the lions, standing well out in the open, as we stood at the copse to-day where you shot the woodcock. It was a rather risky thing to do, but I used to be so sure of my shooting in those days that I did not so much mind the risk. Scarcely had I got round when I heard the reeds parting before the onward rush of some animal. 'Now for it,' said I. On it came. I could see that it was yellow, and prepared for action, when instead of a lion out bounded a beautiful rietbok which had been lying in the shelter of the pan. It must, by the way, have been a rietbok of a peculiarly confiding nature to lay itself down with the lion, like the lamb of prophecy, but I suppose the reeds were thick, and that it kept a long way off.

"Well, I let the rietbok go, and it went like the wind, and kept my eyes fixed upon the reeds. The fire was burning like a furnace now; the flames crackling and roaring as they bit into the reeds, sending spouts of fire twenty feet and more into the air, and making the hot air dance above it in a way that was perfectly dazzling. But the reeds were still half green, and created an enormous quantity of smoke, which came

rolling toward me like a curtain, lying very low on account of the wind. Presently, above the crackling of the fire, I heard a startled roar, then another and another. So the lions were at home.

"I was beginning to get excited now, for, as you fellows know, there is nothing in experience to warm up your nerves like a lion at close quarters, unless it is a wounded buffalo; and I got still more so when I made out through the smoke that the lions were all moving about on the extreme edge of the reeds. Occasionally they would pop their heads out like rabbits from a burrow, and then, catching sight of me standing about fifty yards out, draw them back again. I knew that it must be getting pretty warm behind them, and that they could not keep the game up for long; and I was not mistaken, for suddenly all four of them broke cover together, the old black-maned lion leading by a few yards. I never saw a more splendid sight in all my hunting experience than those four lions bounding across the veldt, overshadowed by the dense pall of smoke and backed by the fiery furnace of the burning reeds.

"I reckoned that they would pass, on their road to the bushy kloof, within about five and twenty yards of me; so, taking a long breath, I got my gun well on to the lion's shoulder--the black-maned one--so as to allow for an inch or two of motion, and catch him through the heart. I was on, dead on, and my finger was just beginning to tighten on the trigger, when suddenly I went blind--a bit of reed-ash had drifted into my right eye. I danced and rubbed, and succeeded in clearing it more or less just in time to see the tail of the last lion vanishing round the bushes up the kloof.

"If ever a man was mad I was that man. It was too bad; and such a shot in the open, too! However, I was not going to be beaten, so I just turned and marched for the kloof. Tom, the driver, begged and implored me not to go; but though as a general rule I never pretend to be very brave (which I am not), I was determined that I would either kill those lions or they should kill me. So I told Tom that he need not come unless

he liked, but I was going; and being a plucky fellow, a Swazi by birth, he shrugged his shoulders, muttered that I was mad or bewitched, and followed doggedly in my tracks.

"We soon got to the kloof, which was about three hundred yards in length and but sparsely wooded, and then the real fun began. There might be a lion behind every bush--there certainly were four lions somewhere; the delicate question was, where. I peeped and poked and looked in every possible direction, with my heart in my mouth, and was at last rewarded by catching a glimpse of something yellow moving behind a bush. At the same moment, from another bush opposite me out burst one of the cubs and
galloped back toward the burned-out pan. I whipped round and let drive a snap-shot that tipped him head over heels, breaking his back within two inches of the root of the tail, and there he lay helpless but glaring. Tom afterward killed him with his assegai. I opened the breech of the gun and hurriedly pulled out the old case, which, to judge from what ensued, must, I suppose, have burst and left a portion of its fabric sticking to the barrel. At any rate, when I tried to get in the new case it would only enter half-way; and--would you believe it?--this was the moment that the lioness, attracted no doubt by the outcry of her cub, chose to put in an appearance. There she stood, twenty paces or so from me, lashing her tail and looking just as wicked as it is possible to conceive. Slowly I stepped backward, trying to push in the new case, and as I did so she moved on in little runs, dropping down after each run. The danger was imminent, and the case would not go in. At the moment I oddly enough thought of the cartridge-maker, whose name I will not mention, and earnestly hoped that if the lion got me some condign punishment would overtake him. It would not go in, so I tried to pull it out. It would not come out either, and my gun was useless if I could not shut it to use the other barrel. I might as well have had no gun. Meanwhile I was walking backward, keeping my eye on the lioness, who was
creeping forward on her belly without a sound, but lashing her tail

and keeping her eye on me; and in it I saw that she was coming in a few seconds more. I dashed my wrist and the palm of my hand against the brass rim of the cartridge till the blood poured from them--look, there are the scars of it to this day!"

Here Quatermain held up his right hand to the light and showed us four or five white cicatrices just where the wrist is set into the hand.

"But it was not of the slightest use," he went on; "the cartridge would not move. I only hope that no other man will ever be put in such an awful position. The lioness gathered herself together, and I gave myself up for lost, when suddenly Tom shouted out from somewhere in my rear:

"'You are walking on to the wounded cub; turn to the right.'

"I had the sense, dazed as I was, to take the hint, and slewing round at right angles, but still keeping my eyes on the lioness, I continued my backward walk.

"To my intense relief, with a low growl she straightened herself, turned, and bounded off farther up the kloof.

"'Come on, inkoos,' said Tom, 'let's get back to the waggon.'

"'All right, Tom,' I answered. 'I will when I have killed those three other lions,' for by this time I was bent on shooting them as I never remember being bent on anything before or since. 'You can go if you like, or you can get up a tree.'

"He considered the position a little, and then he very wisely got up a tree. I wish that I had done the same.

"Meanwhile I had found my knife, which had an extractor in it, and succeeded after some difficulty in hauling out the case which had so

nearly been the cause of my death, and removing the obstruction in the barrel. It was very little thicker than a postage-stamp; certainly not thicker than a piece of writing-paper. This done, I loaded the gun, bound a handkerchief round my wrist and hand to staunch the flowing of the blood, and started on again.

"I had noticed that the lioness went into a thick green bush, or rather cluster of bushes, growing near the water; for there was a little stream running down the kloof, about fifty yards higher up and for this I made. When I got there, however, I could see nothing, so I took up a big stone and threw it into the bushes. I believe that it hit the other cub, for out it came with a rush, giving me a broadside shot, of which I promptly availed myself, knocking it over dead. Out, too, came the lioness like a flash of light, but quick as she went I managed to put the other bullet into her ribs, so that she rolled right over three times like a shot rabbit. I instantly got two more cartridges into the gun, and as I did so the lioness rose again and came crawling toward me on her fore paws, roaring and groaning, and with such an expression of diabolical fury on her countenance as I have not often seen. I shot her again through the chest, and she fell over on to her side quite dead.

"That was the first and last time that I ever killed a brace of lions right and left, and, what is more, I never heard of anybody else doing it. Naturally I was considerably pleased with myself, and having again loaded up, I went on to look for the black-maned beauty who had killed Kaptein. Slowly, and with the greatest care, I proceeded up the kloof, searching every bush and tuft of grass as I went. It was wonderfully exciting work, for I never was sure from one moment to another but that he would be on me. I took comfort, however, from the reflection that a lion rarely attacks a man,--rarely, I say; sometimes he does, as you will see,--unless he is cornered or wounded. I must have been nearly an hour hunting after that lion. Once I thought I saw something move in a clump of tambouki grass, but I could not be sure, and when I trod out the grass I could not find him.

"At last I worked up to the head of the kloof, which made a cul-de-sac. It was formed of a wall of rock about fifty feet high. Down this rock trickled a little waterfall, and in front of it, some seventy feet from its face, was a great piled-up mass of boulders, in the crevices and on the top of which grew ferns, grasses, and stunted bushes. This mass was about twenty-five feet high. The sides of the kloof here were also very steep. Well, I came to the top of the nullah and looked all round. No signs of the lion. Evidently I had either overlooked him farther down or he had escaped right away. It was very vexatious; but still three lions were not a bad bag for one gun before dinner, and I was fain to be content. Accordingly I departed back again, making my way round the isolated pillar of boulders, beginning to feel, as I did so, that I was pretty well done up with excitement and fatigue, and should be more so before I had skinned those three lions. When I had got, as nearly as I could judge, about eighteen yards past the pillar or mass of boulders, I turned to have another look round. I have a pretty sharp eye, but I could see nothing at all.

"Then, on a sudden, I saw something sufficiently alarming. On the top of the mass of boulders, opposite to me, standing out clear against the rock beyond, was the huge black-maned lion. He had been crouching there,
and now arose as though by magic. There he stood lashing his tail, just like a living reproduction of the animal on the gateway of Northumberland House that I have seen a picture of. But he did not stand long. Before I could fire--before I could do more than get the gun to my shoulder--he sprang straight up and out from the rock, and driven by the impetus of that one mighty bound came hurtling through the air toward me.

"Heavens! how grand he looked, and how awful! High into the air he flew, describing a great arch. Just as he touched the highest point of his spring I fired. I did not dare to wait, for I saw that he would clear

the whole space and land right upon me. Without a sight, almost without aim, I fired, as one would fire a snap-shot at a snipe. The bullet told, for I distinctly heard its thud above the rushing sound caused by the passage of the lion through the air. Next second I was swept to the ground (luckily I fell into a low, creeper-clad bush, which broke the shock), and the lion was on the top of me, and the next those great white teeth of his had met in my thigh--I heard them grate against the bone. I yelled out in agony, for I did not feel in the least benumbed and happy, like Dr. Livingstone,--whom, by the way, I knew very well,--and gave myself up for dead. But suddenly, at that moment, the lion's grip on my thigh loosened, and he stood over me, swaying to and fro, his huge mouth, from which the blood was gushing, wide opened. Then
he roared, and the sound shook the rocks.

"To and fro he swung, and then the great head dropped on me, knocking all the breath from my body, and he was dead. My bullet had entered in the centre of his chest and passed out on the right side of the spine about half way down the back.

"The pain of my wound kept me from fainting, and as soon as I got my breath I managed to drag myself from under him. Thank heavens, his great teeth had not crushed my thigh-bone; but I was losing a great deal of blood, and had it not been for the timely arrival of Tom, with whose aid I got the handkerchief from my wrist and tied it round my leg, twisting it tight with a stick, I think that I should have bled to death.

"Well, it was a just reward for my folly in trying to tackle a family of lions single-handed. The odds were too long. I have been lame ever since, and shall be to my dying day; in the month of March the wound always troubles me a great deal, and every three years it breaks out raw. I need scarcely add that I never traded the lot of ivory at Sikukuni's. Another man got it--a German--and made five hundred pounds out of it after paying expenses. I spent the next month on the broad of

my back, and was a cripple for six months after that. And now I've told you the yarn, so I will have a drop of Hollands and go to bed."

THE ELIXIR OF YOUTH

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of *Tales of the Five Towns*, by Arnold Bennett

It was Monday afternoon of Bursley Wakes—not our modern rectified festival, but the wild and naïve orgy of seventy years ago, the days of bear-baiting and of bull-baiting, from which latter phrase, they say, the town derives its name. In those times there was a town-bull, a sort of civic beast; and a certain notorious character kept a bear in his pantry. The 'beating' (baiting) occurred usually on Sunday mornings at six o'clock, with formidable hungry dogs; and little boys used to look forward eagerly to the day when they would be old enough to be permitted to attend. On Sunday afternoons colliers and potters, gathered round the jawbone of a whale which then stood as a natural curiosity on the waste space near the corn-mill, would discuss the fray, and make bets for next Sunday, while the exhausted dogs 040 licked their wounds, or died. During the Wakes week bull and bear were baited at frequent intervals, according to popular demand, for thousands of sportsmen from neighbouring villages seized the opportunity of the fair to witness the fine beatings for which Bursley was famous throughout the country of the Five Towns. In that week the Wakes took possession of the town, which yielded itself with savage abandonment to all the frenzies of license. The public-houses remained continuously open night and day, and the barmen and barmaids never went to bed; every inn engaged special 'talent' in order to attract custom, and for a hundred hours the whole thronged town drank, drank, until the supply of coin of George IV., converging gradually into the coffers of a few persons, ceased to circulate. Towards the end of the Wakes, by way of a last ecstasy, the cockfighters would carry their birds, which had already fought and been called off, perhaps, half a dozen times, to the town-field (where the discreet 40 per cent. brewery now stands), and there match them to a finish. It was a spacious age.

On this Monday afternoon in June the less 041 fervid activities of the Wakes were proceeding as usual in the market-place, overshadowed by

the Town Hall—not the present stone structure with its gold angel, but a brick edifice built on an ashlar basement. Hobby-horses and revolving swing-boats, propelled, with admirable economy to the proprietors, by privileged boys who took their pay in an occasional ride, competed successfully with the skeleton man, the fat or bearded woman, and Aunt Sally. The long toy-tents, artfully roofed with a tinted cloth which permitted only a soft, mellow light to illuminate the wares displayed, were crowded with jostling youth and full of the sound of whistles, 'squarkers,' and various pipes; and multitudes surrounded the gingerbread, nut, and savoury stalls which lined both sides of the roadway as far as Duck Bank. In front of the numerous boxing-booths experts of the 'fancy,' obviously out of condition, offered to fight all comers, and were not seldom well thrashed by impetuous champions of local fame. There were no photographic studios and no cocoanut-shies, for these things had not been thought of; and to us moderns the fair, despite its uncontrolled exuberance of revelry, 042 would have seemed strangely quiet, since neither steam-organ nor hooter nor hurdy-gurdy was there to overwhelm the ear with crashing waves of gigantic sound. But if the special phenomena of a later day were missing from the carnival, others, as astonishing to us as the steam-organ would have been to those uncouth roisterers, were certainly present. Chief, perhaps, among these was the man who retailed the elixir of youth, the veritable eau de jouvence, to credulous drinkers at sixpence a bottle. This magician, whose dark mysterious face and glittering eyes indicated a strain of Romany blood, and whose accent proved that he had at any rate lived much in Yorkshire, had a small booth opposite the watch-house under the Town Hall. On a banner suspended in front of it was painted the legend:

THE INCA OF PERU'S

ELIXER OF YOUTH

SOLD HERE.

ETERNAL YOUTH FOR ALL.

DRINK THIS AND YOU WILL NEVER GROW OLD

AS SUPPLIED TO THE NOBILITY & GENTRY

SIXPENCE PER BOT.

WALK IN, WALK IN, &

CONSULT THE INCA OF PERU.

043 The Inca of Peru, dressed in black velveteens, with a brilliant scarf round his neck, stood at the door of his tent, holding an empty glass in one jewelled hand, and with the other twirling a long and silken moustache. Handsome, graceful, and thoroughly inured to the public gaze, he fronted a small circle of gapers like an actor adroit to make the best of himself, and his tongue wagged fast enough to wag a man's leg off. At a casual glance he might have been taken for thirty, but his age was fifty and more—if you could catch him in the morning before he had put the paint on.

'Ladies and gentlemen of Bursley, this enlightened and beautiful town which I am now visiting for the first time,' he began in a hard, metallic voice, employing again with the glib accuracy of a machine the exact phrases which he had been using all day, 'look at me—look well at me. How old do you think I am? How old do I seem? Twenty, my dear, do you say?' and he turned with practised insolence to a pot-girl in a red shawl who could not have uttered an audible word to save her soul, but who blushed and giggled with pleasure at this mark of attention. 'Ah! you flatter, 044 fair maiden! I look more than twenty, but I think I may say that I do not look thirty. Does any lady or gentleman think I look thirty? No! As a matter of fact, I was twenty-nine years of age when, in South America, while exploring the ruins of the most ancient civilization of the world—of the world, ladies and gentlemen—I made my wonderful discovery, the Elixir of Youth!'

'What art blethering at, Licksy?' a drunken man called from the back of the crowd, and the nickname stuck to the great discoverer during the rest of the Wakes.

'That, ladies and gentlemen,' the Inca of Peru continued unperturbed, 'was —seventy-two years ago. I am now a hundred and one years old precisely, and as fresh as a kitten, all along of my marvellous elixir. Far older, for instance, than this good dame here.'

He pointed to an aged and wrinkled woman, in blue cotton and a white mutch, who was placidly smoking a short cutty. This creature, bowed and satiate with monotonous years, took the pipe from her indrawn lips, and asked in a weary, trembling falsetto:

'How many wives hast had?'

045 'Seventane,' the Inca retorted quickly, dropping at once into broad dialect, 'and now lone and lookin' to wed again. Wilt have me?'

'Nay,' replied the crone. 'I've buried four mysen, and no man o' mine shall bury me.'

There was a burst of laughter, amid which the Inca, taking the crowd archly into his confidence, remarked:

'I've never administered my elixir to any of my wives, ladies and gentlemen. You may blame me, but I freely confess the fact;' and he winked.

'Licksy! Licksy!' the drunken man idiotically chanted.

'And now,' the Inca proceeded, coming at length to the practical part of his ovation, 'see here!' With the rapidity of a conjurer he whipped from his

pocket a small bottle, and held it up before the increasing audience. It contained a reddish fluid, which shone bright and rich in the sunlight. 'See here!' he cried magnificently, but he was destined to interruption.

A sudden cry arose of 'Black Jack! Black Jack! 'Tis him! He's caught!' And the 046 Inca's crowd, together with all the other crowds filling the market-place, surged off eastward in a dense, struggling mass.

The cynosure of every eye was a springless clay-cart, which was being slowly driven past the newly-erected 'big house' of Enoch Wood, Esquire, towards the Town Hall. In this, cart were two constables, with their painted staves drawn, and between the constables sat a man securely chained—Black Jack of Moorthorne, the mining village which lies over the ridge a mile or so east of Bursley. The captive was a ferocious and splendid young Hercules, tall, with enormous limbs and hands and heavy black brows. He was dressed in his soiled working attire of a collier, the trousers strapped under the knees, and his feet shod in vast clogs. With open throat, small head, great jaws, and bold beady eyes, he looked what he was, the superb brute—the brute reckless of all save the instant satisfaction of his desires. He came of a family of colliers, the most debased class in a lawless district. Jack's father had been a colliery-serf, legally enslaved to his colliery, legally liable to be sold with the colliery as a chattel, 047 and legally bound to bring up all his sons as colliers, until the Act of George III. put an end to this incredible survival from the customs of the Dark Ages. Black Jack was now a hero to the crowd, and knew it, for those vast clogs had kicked a woman to death on the previous day. She was a Moorthorne woman, not his wife, but his sweetheart, older than he; people said that she nagged him, and that he was tired of her. The murderer had hidden for a night, and then, defiantly, surrendered to the watch, and the watch were taking him to the watch-house in the ashlar basement of the Town Hall. The feeble horse between the shafts of the cart moved with difficulty through the press, and often the coloured staves of the constables came down thwack on the heads of heedless youth. At length the cart reached the space between the watch-house and the tent of the Inca of Peru,

where it stopped while the constables unlocked a massive door; the prisoner remained proudly in the cart, accepting, with obvious delight, the tribute of cheers and jeers, hoots and shouts, from five thousand mouths.

The Inca of Peru stood at the door of his 048 tent and surveyed Black Jack, who was not more than a few feet away from him.

'Have a glass of my elixir,' he said to the death-dealer; 'no one in this town needs it more than thee, by all accounts. Have a glass, and live for ever. Only sixpence.'

The man in the cart laughed aloud.

'I've nowt on me—not a farden,' he answered, in a strong grating voice.

At that moment a girl, half hidden by the cart, sprang forward, offering something in her outstretched palm to the Inca; but he, misunderstanding her intention, merely glanced with passing interest at her face, and returned his gaze to the prisoner.

'I'll give thee a glass, lad,' he said quickly, 'and then thou canst defy Jack Ketch.'

The crowd yelled with excitement, and the murderer held forth his great hand for the potion. Using every art to enhance the effect of this dramatic advertisement, the Inca of Peru raised his bottle on high, and said in a loud, impressive tone:

'This precious liquid has the property, possessed by no other liquid on earth, of frothing twice. I shall pour it into the glass, 049 and it will froth. Black Jack will drink it, and after he has drunk it will froth again. Observe!'

He uncorked the bottle and filled the glass with the reddish fluid, which after a few seconds duly effervesced, to the vague wonder of the

populace. The Inca held the glass till the froth had subsided, and then solemnly gave it to Black Jack.

'Drink!' commanded the Inca.

Black Jack took the draught at a gulp, and instantly flung the glass at the Inca's face. It missed him, however. There were signs of a fracas, but the door of the watch-house swung opportunely open, and Jack was dragged from the cart and hustled within. The crowd, with a crowd's fickleness, turned to other affairs.

That evening the ingenious Inca of Peru did good trade for several hours, but towards eleven o'clock the attraction of the public-houses and of a grand special combined bull and bear beating by moonlight in the large yard of the Cock Inn drew away the circle of his customers until there was none left. He retired inside the tent with several pounds in his pocket and a god's consciousness of having 050 made immortal many of the sons and daughters of Adam.

As he was counting out his gains on the tub of eternal youth by the flicker of a dip, someone lifted the flap of the booth and stealthily entered. He sprang up, fearing robbery with violence, which was sufficiently common during the Wakes; but it was only the young girl who had stood behind the cart when he offered to Black Jack his priceless boon. The Inca had noticed her with increasing interest several times during the evening as she loitered restless near the door of the watch-house.

'What do you want?' he asked her, with the ingratiating affability of the rake who foresees everything.

'Give me a drink.'

'A drink of what, my dear?'

'Licksy.'

He raised the dip, and by its light examined her face. It was a kind of face which carries no provocative signal for nine men out of ten, but which will haunt the tenth: a child's face with a passionate woman's eyes burning and dying in it—black hair, black eyes, thin pale 051 cheeks, equine nostrils, red lips, small ears, and the smallest chin conceivable. He smiled at her, pleased.

'Can you pay for it?' he said pleasantly.

The girl evidently belonged to the poorest class. Her shaggy, uncovered head, lean frame, torn gown, and bare feet, all spoke of hardship and neglect.

'I've a silver groat,' she answered, and closed her small fist tighter.

'A silver groat!' he exclaimed, rather astonished. 'Where did you get that from?'

'He give it me for a-fairing yesterday.'

'Who?'

'Him yonder'—she jerked her head back to indicate the watch-house —'Black Jack.'

'What for?'

'He kissed me,' she said boldly; 'I'm his sweetheart.'

'Eh!' The Inca paused a moment, startled. 'But he killed his sweetheart yesterday.'

'What! Meg!' the girl exclaimed with deep scorn. 'Her weren't his true sweetheart. Her druv him to it. Serve her well right! Owd Meg!'

'How old are you, my dear?'

052 'Don't know. But feyther said last Wakes I was fourtane. I mun keep young for Jack. He wunna have me if I'm owd.'

'But he'll be hanged, they say.'

She gave a short, satisfied laugh.

'Not now he's drunk Licksy—hangman won't get him. I heard a man say Jack 'd get off wi' twenty year for manslaughter, most like.'

'And you'll wait twenty years for him?'

'Yes,' she said; 'I'll meet him at prison gates. But I mun be young. Give me a drink o' Licksy.'

He drew the red draught in silence, and after it had effervesced offered it to her.

"Tis raight?' she questioned, taking the glass.

The Inca nodded, and, lifting the vessel, she opened her eager lips and became immortal. It was the first time in her life that she had drunk out of a glass, and it would be the last.

Struck dumb by the trusting joy in those profound eyes, the Inca took the empty glass from her trembling hand. Frail organism and prey of love! Passion had surprised her too young. Noon had come before the flower could open. She went out of the tent.

053 'Wench!' the Inca called after her, 'thy groat!'

She paid him and stood aimless for a second, and then started to cross the roadway. Simultaneously there was a rush and a roar from the Cock yard close by. The raging bull, dragging its ropes, and followed by a crowd of alarmed pursuers, dashed out. The girl was plain in the moonlight. Many others were abroad, but the bull seemed to see nothing but her, and, lowering his huge head, he charged with shut eyes and flung her over the Inca's booth.

'Thou's gotten thy wish: thou'rt young for ever!' the Inca of Peru, made a poet for an instant by this disaster, murmured to himself as he bent with the curious crowd over the corpse.

Black Jack was hanged.

Many years after all this Bursley built itself a new Town Hall (with a spire, and a gold angel on the top in the act of crowning the bailiwick with a gold crown), and began to think about getting up in the world.